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ENG 367 - The Epic
The Iliad

The Iliad: War or more than War

The story of The Iliad is a story depicting 50 latter days at the Trojan War. Upon Reading through this classical epic poem, especially for the first time, and hearing the clamor of brass armaments and the mortal blows described in unmitigated detail, it would appear that this is a book *firstly* about a war. And as the story progresses, with over 16,000 lines, all having to do with the Trojan War, the glories of battle, the vicissitudes of fortune, the interfering gods, the violence and bloodshed of primitive warfare--after all this--the story ends with just one line, on its own stanza, that strangely reads: "And so the Trojans buried Hector breaker of horses."

After reading this line, and confirming for my own sake that there was no Book 25, I was left having to accept this line as the conclusion to such a magnanimous story. So, I read this line again. Then, after a few seconds, I read this line again. And after reading this line for the 6th time, I was still left bemused. I had assumed from the very beginning of this poem that The Iliad was about the Trojan War and about scores of heroes, Greek and Trojan alike, not just about Hector, well at least not solely about Hector. But eventually, I started to understand.

And the density of this line started to resound in my head, oscillating in profundity.

At the end of the Iliad, the Trojan War is not over, which in itself tells the reader something about the Trojan War. The Trojan War was long, and by not ending the war at the end of this poem, it reiterates the longevity of this war. To be able to "cover" an entire war in over 16,000 lines--a few nights of reading--would in itself belie the war's enormity. Thus Homer concedes such a task before the reader can even notice it. Simply put, the Iliad is not a story about just a war; it is a story about much more, with the Trojan War as the setting. This laconic ending, this dark yet simple line, reiterates this point and forces the reader to rethink the marrow of this story, which is: the showcasing of humanity, or to borrow from Shakespeare, "to hold the mirror up to nature".

So the Trojan War is the setting, yet also an apropos setting for this story; for it is itself used as a mechanism to fully present the human condition. It is through suffering, through trials, and through conflict, that humanity most visible asserts itself. It is a time where we can see the best or the worst in humanity in its most veritable form. And there is no institution more capable of doing this than war. So Homer, in over 16,000 lines of beautiful hexameter verse shows us humanity, whose flaws and characteristics remain constant

despite being written 2,700 years ago. And from this enormous word, "humanity", Homer brings to life the human condition and with it, man's greatest weaknesses and strengths.

Pride, the greatest of the seven deadly sins, sometimes referred to as superbia, is a primary impetus to all the negative motions in this story. The word hubris, which is derived from the Greek word *hybris*, is often a major theme in literary study. It often refers to the tragic flaw in a protagonist of a story, a flaw which is very often attributed as hubris, or excessive pride and self-confidence. In the very first book of the Iliad, Achilles' pride is hurt by Agamemnon, who has taken away his female prize, Brisis. Achilles goes so far as to ask his mother, Thetis, to use her immortal influence to make the Greeks start to lose the war. By doing so, Achilles hopes the Greeks will soon realize how valuable he was, and repent for taking away Brises.

"...help the Trojan cause,
to pin the Achaeans back against their ships,
trap them round the bay and mow them down.
So all can reap the benefits of their king—
so even mighty Atrides can see how mad he was
to disgrace Achilles, the best of the Achaeans!"

Even Agamemnon is a victim to pride in this episode. After the Greeks suffer great losses, due primarily to Achilles' plea to his mother, the Greek Leader refuses to make amends to Achilles. It is only after a considerable period, and after heavy losses, does Agamemnon agree to give back what he takes from Achilles.

Aside from pure pride, the Iliad shows us variations of pride--pride "with a hint of vanity". This is seen in the pre-story to the Iliad. It all began with a wedding, the wedding of Achilles' father and mother, Peleus and Thetis. The whole of mount Olympus was invited to this wedding except for one god, Eris, the god of discord. Her pride was hurt, and for spite, she went to the wedding anyway, and cast an apple down on the table, where inscribed were the words "to the fairest". Three goddesses claimed this apple, Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite. To settle this dispute, Zeus left it up to Paris, who eventually gives this glory to Aphrodite, leaving the other two goddesses incensed. This is the main motive behind the god's overt concern over such a "mortal" affair.

Greed and gluttony are seen more notably back at the Greek camp. The Greek army makes it a habit of plundering every city they happen to conquer, taking with them scores of women to satiate their lusty passions. One of these trophy-ladies is also the cause of the rift between Agamemnon and Achilles, as

mentioned earlier. There, the greed of Agamemnon leads him to unwavering take for himself Achilles' well-earned prize.

This is what the Iliad is about: human nature. But what Homer presents is not all pejorative. There are also some positive human virtues that are demonstrated within the Iliad, like Love and honor.

Whether it is filial love, or something "more", is irrelevant, but Achilles loves his friend Patroclus. And to hear that he is dead, this news completely awakens Achilles from his stubborn bout of civil-disobedience, and brings the Greeks back on the winning side of war. Here, Homer shows us the power of love, and its striking power to move people, in ways that largess and honor of all kinds can not.

The notion of honor is imbued throughout the text as something more precious than wealth. Battles are fought over the corpses of dead soldiers, in hopes to retrieve the body to salvage the honor of the fallen comrade—to prevent the enemy from defiling the honor of a fallen soldier. Heroes are revered for their skills in battle, as opposed to their riches or wealth.

Then towards the height of battle, amongst descriptions so sanguinary and ferocious in detail, Homer pauses, and describes humanity. The shield of Achilles, forged newly by Hephaestus, contains an enormous and elaborate picture of cities, people,

laughing, weddings, singing, children, or simply put, the shield portrays humanity. Hector, before his last meeting with Achilles, laps around the city of Troy, reminiscing on memories of that city--another plaintive illustration of humanity.

The Iliad is secondly about the Trojan War, and firstly about the human condition. It is an organic piece of literature that has survived thousands of years, because it talks to us all, and shows us what humans are, dispassionately accentuating mankind's weaknesses and strengths. Homer shows us the dimensions of being human, enumerating the sins that plague existence, but offering hope. There is hope in man's virtues; there is love, and honor, and humanity. As long as these things survive, mankind survives--and the Iliad and Homer survive.

Works Cited

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