

Achilles

Achilles is the protagonist of the *Iliad*. The wrath of Achilles is the subject of the epic, as the opening line says. The structure of the epic is determined by the direction of that wrath: first toward Agamemnon, who has cheated and insulted Achilles, and then toward Hector, who has killed Achilles' friend in battle. The two destructive fits of anger begin and end the action of the epic, but they do not define entirely the character of Achilles. The two angers are sharply different: the quarrel with Agamemnon discloses a childish, primitive selfishness that is nevertheless condoned by the code of Greek behavior. The second springs from love. So complex, however, is Achilles' character, that we can see that the second anger is also rooted in Achilles' selfishness, for Patroclus was ambiguously many things to Achilles- devoted friend, fellow warrior, servant, and psychological opposite whose unselfish disposition complemented Achilles' arrogance and impatience with other people. Patroclus was also something like Briseis, the prize girl, and Hector's killing patroclus is parallel to Agamemnon's claiming Briseis. Achilles loves things and people for the honor they give him. He is with the Greek forces to win honor and prizes for himself, not primarily to be an ally to Agamemnon and Menelaos. It is his fate to lose all that he loves, and to have to fight for them after he has lost them and cannot reclaim them.

Achilles has a strong sense of social order that in the beginning, manifests itself in his concern for the disorder in the Achaian camp; a deadly plague is destroying the soldiers, and Achilles wants to know the reason why. His king, Agamemnon, will not act, so Achilles decides to act: He calls for an assembly of the entire army. In doing this Achilles upsets the order of protocol; only Agamemnon can decide to call an assembly, but Achilles does so to try to return order to Achaian camp. He succeeds, partially. He finds out why the plague is killing hundreds of Achaian soldiers, but in the process, he creates disorder when it is revealed that Agamemnon is responsible for the deadly plague. Thus, Achilles' attempt to return order to the Achaian camp does little, ultimately to establish order. Apollo lifts the plague, but after Achilles withdraws himself and his troops from the Achaian army, disorder still remains among the Achaians.

Achilles is a tragic figure, and for the Greeks tragedy was the deepening of understanding through a calamity that changes one's relationship to the world. Achilles is reconciled to Agamemnon, and he is, to his surprise, reconciled in a sense to Hector. When Hector, before his death, asks for an agreement that neither combatant will despoil the other's body but return it for decent burial, Achilles refuses, saying that the lion makes no pacts. Yet Achilles does return Hector's body once his grief for Patroclus has made him understand the claims of other people's grief (a quality of manhood rather than of lions). He also learns sympathy when Priam makes him understand how Achilles' father, Peleus, will feel when he, too, is dead in battle.

Achilles is also a character of great nobility, not only for generosity with which he releases others from the cruelty of his anger but also because he accepts the fate that he has known all along: that he has the choice of winning glory and dying young, or of living to inglorious old age. He does not question that fate when he goes to avenge Patroclus, for here love has canceled selfishness, though he mentions the fate as one of his reasons for remaining firm in his resolve to bring disgrace on Agamemnon.

In Achilles we see the maturity of a man who, from birth, was used to taking admiration for granted, who remained a child at heart, with all of a child's claims to attention and prerogatives. At the beginning of the *Iliad* he is a prince among men, haughty and arrogant, a lucky man accomplished in war and rich in possessions and friends, and with the whole attention of his mind directed toward his own aggrandizement and luxury. When the *Iliad* closes he is also a wise man, for he has learned pity and the larger scope of the heart's understanding wherein the suffering of others has dissolved both his anger and his selfishness.

Although Achilles possesses superhuman strength and has a close relationship with the gods, he may strike modern readers as less than heroic. He has all the marks of a great warrior, and indeed proves the mightiest man in the Achaian army, but his deep-seated character flaws constantly impede his ability to act with nobility and integrity. He cannot control his pride or the rage that surges up when that pride is injured. This attribute so poisons him that he abandons his comrades and even prays that the Trojans will slaughter them, all because he has been slighted at the hands of his commander, Agamemnon. Achilles is driven primarily by thirst for glory. Part of him yearns to live a long, easy life, but he knows that his personal fate forces him to choose between the two. Ultimately, he is willing to sacrifice everything else so that his name will be remembered.