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Great Books: The Iliad

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Rage and Greed in “The Iliad”

“Rage-Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus’ son Achilles, murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses, hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls, great fighters’ souls, but made their bodies carrion, feasts for the dogs and birds, and the will of Zeus was moving toward its end.” Homer’s epic *The Iliad* opens with the rage of Achilles and its toll on the Achaean army. The book is filled with the personal struggles of ancient Greeks in an unending war. Homer employs expressive imagery to emphasize fury and greed in the characters.

Homer uses the expressive imagery to display the fury of characters in *The Iliad*. The book has rage as a theme throughout the book. In fact, book one of Iliad is titled “The Rage of Achilles” in which Achilles is enraged after Bryseis, his war-bride, is taken away from him by Agamemnon. The book has very vivid descriptions of his rage. Achilles is extremely furious after having Bryseis taken away from him and in his fury considers murdering the Supreme Commander of the Achaeans, Agamemnon. “The heart in his rugged chest was pounding, torn . . . Should he draw the long sharp sword slung at his hip, thrust through the ranks and kill Agamemnon now?-or check his rage and beat his fury down” (83)? At this point Achilles is so furious he considers turning on a superior in the army, which is extremely dangerous, as the entire army could turn on

him. This passage shows just how enraged Achilles is and his consideration of murdering Agamemnon. However, Agamemnon also struggles with uncontrollable rage. Agamemnon explodes with fury because he is unwilling to give up Chryses daughter. "But among them rose the fighting son of Atreus, Lord of the far-flung kingdoms, Agamemnon-furious, his dark heart filled to the brim, blazing with anger now, his eyes like searing fire" (80-81). The evocative imagery depicts the anger of these Achaean kings. Homer shows readers the true nature of the fury by comparing it with examples such as "searing fire" or "blazing with anger." The characters in the Iliad often deal with Rage, but what other issues do they deal with?

Homer also uses expressive imagery to show greed, another common issue with characters in *The Iliad*. Agamemnon is an extremely greedy character throughout the story. In one scene of the book Achilles rebukes Agamemnon saying, "My honors never equal yours whenever we sack some wealthy Trojan stronghold-my arms bear the brunt of the raw, savage fighting, true, but when it comes to dividing up the plunder the lion's share is yours, and back I go to my ships, clutching some scrap, some pittance that I love, when I have fought to exhaustion" (83). Agamemnon is not the best fighter of the Achaeans but still he takes the largest share of the plunder from the battle. He considers it his right because he is the Supreme Commander of the army even though he does not take the brunt of the war. Homer uses the imagery "lion's share" to illustrate Agamemnon's large trove of treasure from the war. In addition when Agamemnon is told that he must send Chryses back his daughter he adamantly refuses to give up his war-bride. Later Agamemnon complains when Achilles goes with Calchas to convince him that he absolutely has to send back Chryseis. Agamemnon tells Calchas, "But fetch

me another prize, and straight off too, else I alone of the Argives go without my honor. That would be a disgrace. You are all witness, look-my prize is snatched away”(81)! Agamemnon is furious at having Chryseis taken from him and demands compensation in a very childish way. The reader feels almost like Achilles and Agamemnon arguing as two toddlers fighting over the same toy. Homer uses imagery to help readers see that Agamemnon is an extremely greedy character in the *Iliad*, who demands riches from the battle and compensation when his bride is taken from him.

"Enough. Let bygones be bygones now. Done is done. How on earth can a man rage on forever" The character Achilles is eventually able to put away his rage and take up arms against the Trojans, but at what cost? The greatest warriors of the Achaeans are either dead or injured, and Achilles' brother-in-arms has been slain by mighty Hector. Homer clearly illustrates for us the cost of rage and greed. What might have seemed like a noble cause at one point, is worthless, as it only leaves behind sorrow and regret. With powerful imagery Homer shows us in *The Iliad* that in the end rage and greed only bring death and destruction.