

Iliad Study Questions

In this section are some recommended secondary readings, and some questions which may help to focus your reading experience as well as our discussions of the texts.

Iliad 1-4

Suggested Secondary Reading: Bernard Knox, *Introduction*, 3-30.

Why does the poem start where it starts? How does the precipitating conflict of the poem (Agamemnon and Achilles) resemble the basis for the war between the cultures of the Achaians and the Trojans?

How are the gods represented, and how does the divine condition compare to the human? How influential are the gods on human action? Compare especially the council of the heroes in Book 1 with that of the gods; the dream sent by Zeus and Agamemnon's response in Book 2; Aphrodite's interventions and Paris and Helen's responses in Book 3.

What are the conditions which make the war both inevitable and unwinnable?

What are the two sides fighting for? Is peace impossible? Why can't the Greeks just pack up and go home? Why can't the Trojans restore Helen, along with appropriate compensation?

Are there distinctions drawn between Greeks and Trojans? Does Homer take sides in his representation of the heroes?

What are the relations between words and deeds in the heroic life?

What holds a warrior culture together? What threatens its disintegration?

Iliad 5-8

Suggested Secondary Reading: Bernard Knox, *Introduction*, 23-45.
Bruno Snell, "Homer's View of Man," in *Bloom*, ed., pp. 49-63.

How are women represented, and what are the positions of women in the poem.

See especially Helen in 3 and 6, and Andromache in 6. Is there any psychological or symbolic linkage to be made between the actions and attitudes of the women and of the goddesses Thetis, Hera, Athena, Aphrodite?

What are the major elements of Diomedes' aristeia in Book 5? What is the symbolic and thematic significance of his battles with the gods?

In Book 6, Diomedes's aristeia is interrupted by his confrontation with Glaucus.

What is the significance of their stories, and of gift-giving in the heroic world?

What are the wider ramifications of the passage which begins Glaucus's speech:

"High-hearted son of Tydeus, why ask about my birth? / Like the generations of leaves, the lives of mortal men" (6. 170-75)?

Study Hector's meeting with Andromache and their child Astyanax (6. 462-600).

Note the poem's structural contrasts between Hector and Achilles, on the one hand, and Hector and Paris, on the other. Is Hector fighting for something different from the other heroes? What's the importance and the role of family in the heroic world?

Study the attitude and activity of Zeus at the end of Book 7 and the beginning

of Book 8. Is there any consistency or design to the actions of the king and father of gods?

Iliad 9-12

Suggested Secondary Reading: E.R. Dodds, "Agamemnon's Apology," in *Bloom*, ed., 71-85.

What is Agamemnon's offer of recompense to Achilles in Book 9, and how (and why) does Odysseus modify it? Why does Achilles refuse Agamemnon's offer? How does Homer shape your response to this critical rejection? What is your attitude toward Achilles at this point in the narrative?

In Book 10, are there differences in motivation and strategy between the night scouting expedition of Diomedes and Odysseus and that of Dolon?

In Book 11, note the successive wounding of the various Greek heroes, and the entrance of Patroclus. How has Patroclus's relationship to Agamemnon been represented thus far, and what's the narrative effect of the poet's announcing, "from that moment on his doom was sealed" (11. 714).

What's the narrative and thematic point of Nestor's long digression (11.777-962)?

Why are we given an account of the eventual fate of the rampart built by the Greeks (12. 4-40)?

What are the effects achieved by the epic similes of 12.322-36 (the snowfall) and 12. 502-505 (the working widow)? Are there other epic similes achieving similar or other effects?

***Iliad* 13-16**

Suggested Secondary Reading: Norman Austin, "Homeric Icons," in *Myrsiades*, ed., 63-71.

Norman Austin, "The Function of Digressions in the *Iliad*," in *Bloom*, ed., Homer, 151-63.

Hera's seduction of Zeus in 14 provides a digression from the primary narrative of human warfare. What is the tone and the thematic or symbolic point of the digression?

Homer employs the same stallion simile to describe Hector (15. 313-18) as had earlier described Paris (6. 604-09); does the simile function differently or the same in the two contexts and in relation to the two characters?

Study closely Achilles's speech to Patroclus in 16. 57-119, and the arming of Patroclus in 16. 155-184. What is the nature and basis of their friendship and what is Achilles's state of mind at this point of action?

What is the effect of Zeus's response to the impending death of Sarpedon (16. 506-48), and why is it placed in the narrative where it is placed?

Why does the poet adopt a second-person address to Patroclus as "Patroclus O my rider" (16. 682 passim)?

What is the effect of Patroclus dying the way he does, and why is Apollo so actively involved in it (16. 903 ff.)?

***Iliad* 17-20**

Suggested Secondary Reading: James Redfield, "Similes and the Shield of Achilles,"
Nature and Culture, 186-204.

Why are so many willing to battle and die over Patroclus's corpse?

What is at stake for Achilles in Patroclus's death, and why does it change his mind?

Study the symbolism and the thematic function of the shield which Hephaestus forges for Achilles (18. 558-709).

Briseis's only words in the epic are her lament for Patroclus (19. 333-56). Why?

Iliad 21-24

Suggested Secondary Reading: Knox, *Introduction*, 45-64.
Redfield, "Funeral Games," "The Ransoming of Hector," *Nature and Culture*,
204-23.

What is the narrative effect and consequence, and the thematic function, of Achilles's battle with the river Scamander in Book 21?

What ironies frame Hector's death? Does he die a "heroic" death?

Why are the funeral games for Patroclus included so late in the narrative? Do they seem anticlimactic and digressive, or do they serve thematic and narrative purposes?

Reflect carefully on Achilles's change of heart in Book 24. What brings it about? Does it seem plausible to you? What is your final assessment of Achilles

as “best of the Achaeans” and of homeric heroism?