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Gods Among Men

Homer’s *The Iliad* takes place in an era dominated by war and the fearless pursuit for glory. The mortal men pray to the powerful gods to endow them with strength, wisdom, and courage, eager to charge into battle and kill for glory and a place in history. I would argue, however, that the pursuit of glory alone is not what defines a hero by today’s standards. One main trait of a modern day hero is their selflessness and willingness to help those in need. Often times the characters in the Iliad are too blinded by their own emotion that they fail to perform in this aspect. Though there isn’t one character in particular who fits the modern definition of a hero in its entirety, we are able to see heroic traits such as bravery, selflessness, and compassion manifested in a variety of characters that together could create a hero of the modern day.

The heroes of *The Iliad* were humans who were endowed with superhuman abilities and descended from the immortal gods themselves. One major thing that separates a hero from the gods however is the hero’s mortality and bravery. The gods play war like it is a game, bickering with each other while providing support to their favored side. Though they do participate in the war by instilling cowardice, strength, or other virtues the heroes or joining to fight, overall they are simply facilitators of the heroic action. The influence that the gods give over the battle provides a platform from which the ancient Greek hero is able to rise, but the influence is not heroic in itself. The decision made by the gods to come down and join the battle fighting or instill heroic values in the men even against Zeus’ wishes could be viewed as heroic, but in the end there is no real risk to their lives or well-being. Essentially the gods are incapable of being heroes because they are not able to show bravery in the face of defeat and experience death as mortals do. The true heroes in the Iliad aren’t those with the most power, but those who put themselves in dangerous situations with the risk of losing everything. A hero can be immortalized, but a true hero is not immortal by nature.

Achilles is arguably the greatest ancient Greek hero but is also one of the most flawed. Known to be an incredible fighter who is destined for a short life, Achilles is a man of unbending principles who constantly chooses violence and death over life in the name of personal glory. The foremost example of this is one of the central conflicts of *The Iliad*; though he is needed by his people Achilles refuses to fight in the war because his pride was insulted by Agamemnon. “I’ll reach Phthia after a three-day sale… and I’ll bring back more gold and bronze, silken-wasted women, grey iron- everything except the prize of honor the warlord Agamemnon gave me and in his insulting arrogance took back” (p.97 l.373). Achilles isn’t concerned about his men or the status of the battle, he simply wants the glory that comes with it. His refusal to fight leads to the needless deaths of many of his people, yet he is more preoccupied with pride being slighted and his “prize” being stolen. His pride hinders him to the point where he no longer has compassion for the common man and his actions are completely driven by selfish intentions. Achilles isn’t able to overcome this fierce pride until the death of Patroclus, to which Achilles vows to take revenge. Blinded by rage and driven mad by grief, Achilles soon comes to abandon all remaining potential of being a modern day hero.

Though fueled by his pride, Achilles’ biggest downfall is his uncontrollable rage that prevents him from acting with the virtuousness of a hero. Before facing off, Hector tries to cut a deal with Achilles to not dishonor his corpse and allow it to be taken back to Troy to be burned by his people. Bloodthirsty and enraged, Achilles refuses Hector’s request, instead slaying him and tying his life-less body to the back of his chariot to be dragged across the battlefield for 9 days. Achilles ironically grieves Patroclus’ death for days on end, yet each morning without remorse mounts his chariot and drags Hector’s body around the funeral pyre. Ultimately this one-sided responsiveness defines Achilles’ fate as a hero. He continues with this cruelty by allowing his men to shame and defile hectors body. Eventually Hector’s father, Priam, comes to Achilles to beg for his son’s body back so that he can have peace, and at this moment Achilles is taken aback. “Think of your own father, godlike Achilles. He and I are both on the doorstep of old age… Think of your own father, and pity me. I have borne what no man who has walked this earth has ever yet born. I have kissed the hand of the man who killed my son” (p.231 l.520). In this moment Achilles feels genuine sympathy for Priam, thinking of both his father and Patroclus. For the first time Achilles fiery rage is tempered by the realization of what he has put Priam through. Not only does he allow Priam to take Hector’s body back but he provides him food, shelter for the night, and allows for a temporary truce between the two sides to allow the Trojans time to mourn Hector. Having begun the book as headstrong, selfish, and impulsive man, Achilles gets minor redemption as a hero in Book 24 with his act of compassion for Priam. Though it is noble to honor Priam’s wishes, Achilles has already soiled any ethical morality he had in his act of rage, thus sacrificing values that a hero holds most dear.

The hero with the most virtuous qualities in *The Iliad* is Hector. Unlike any other heroes in the epic, Hector fights in and for his homeland. He fights not only to protect his city but his wife and child inside as well. Rather than fight solely for the purpose of personal glory, such as Achilles, he fights in defense of his city and people. While comforting Andromache before his leave for battle he confesses to her that “There will come a day when holy Ilion will perish... when some bronze-armored Greek leads you away in tears, on your first day of slavery”, and makes the vow, “may I be dead and the earth heaped up above me before I hear your cry as you are dragged away”. He understands the inevitable but would rather be dead than not fight for what he believes in. Hector is unlike the other heroes due to the love and compassion he has for his wife and son that makes him stand out as a heroic man rather than a “godlike” Achilles. A hero has someone to protect, and he shows himself to be kindhearted, yet determined to see his duties to the end no matter the sacrifice. Though previously inflicted with cowardice, Hector’s last moment of heroism comes when he finally faces down with Achilles. Although he realizes that he has been deceived by Athena and cannot win, he still charges at Achilles with full force, in hopes of doing something “that future generations will remember”. It is arguable that Hector too fights for glory and honor, but it is faithful protection of his people and loved ones that makes him heroic.

While Hector and Achilles are bound by fate to their ways, Patroclus stands out as a hero who is torn between his undying loyalty to his friend and his loyalty to his comrades. What makes Patroclus an interesting character is his capacity to view his environment with an altruistic perspective. In book 16 Patroclus shows that, unlike Achilles, he has true compassion for the common man. When he sees the Trojans bearing down and lives of his men threatened, rather than rush hastily into battle for glory Patroclus does what he believes to be right. “Don’t be vengeful. They are dying out there, all of our best- or who used to be our best- they’ve all been hit and are lying wounded in camp… But you are incurable, Achilles. God forbid I ever feel the spite you nurse in your heart… What good will it do future generations if you let us go down to this defeat in cold blood?” (p.154 l.25). He goes to Achilles first and begs his permission to fight and to wear his armor in order to give the Greek forces a fighting chance, thus doing right both by his men and Achilles. This is noble because he knows that wearing the armor will put him at risk but it will also give his men the morale boost they need to push the Trojans back. Patroclus accepts Achilles’ refusal to fight, yet still has an intrinsic goodness that obliges him to help his comrades. Overall it is his undying loyalty to Achilles and compassion for others that establishes him as a true tragic hero because, just like Troy, he was always destined to fall.

*The Iliad* is a tale of Greek heroics and the penultimate conclusion of the Trojan War. The true heroes weren’t the people who harvested the most kills however, but the ones who showed courage, compassion, and loyalty all in the face of danger or destruction. A hero cannot be controlled by his or her emotions but instead compelled by them to do something better and to make the world a better place for those other than himself. From The Iliad we can admire the might of Achilles, the bravery of Hector, and the intrinsic compassion held by Patroclus for his fellow man. In a society that has valued heroism for ages, we are able to take from these great heroes ideals worth striving for.