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## Homeric Similes – Emotional Bonding Through Poetic Devices

by Ryan Tris

(English 1159)

In Robert Fagles's translation of Homer's *The Iliad*, there is extensive use of similes. Homer takes these literary devices so far that the term Homeric simile (aka epic simile) was coined to describe what is often a multi-lined, detailed description of a character, action or setting. Homer's similes infuse the story with poetic descriptions that make the story palatable and real. Homer chooses to use figurative writing to enhance a story which most of the audience already knew. These similes allow Homer to describe his version of the classic tale while painting vivid imagery in the audience's head. Homer often invokes these epic similes when describing a character's emotional state, or when describing a battlefield experience. I believe Homer does this to allow a lay person to connect with the often-abstract situations occurring throughout story. By doing this Homer not only makes the story more vivid but he also allows the audience, no matter their level of knowledge or experience, to understand and become emotionally involved in the story.

Unsurprisingly, anger is often the basis of a Homeric simile, for Homer had chosen to focus his story of the Trojan war around Achilles and his rage. Homer often finds it necessary to convey the overwhelming level of rage through a visual representation an emotional state. An epic simile is used to provide, in undeniable terms, the huge impact rage has throughout story. In book five Ares is wounded by Diomedes. Ares is furious, and anger seethes through his veins. Homer puts Ares's anger into a visual metaphor his audience can see: "But now, / wild as a black cyclone twisting out of a cloudbank, / building up from the day's heat, blasts and towers / so brazen Ares looked to Tydeus' son Diomedes" (5.997-1002). The imagery of Ares's fury is palpable, for you can feel his glare as he sweeps up into a vortex of anger and rage. Homer continues to use this kind of vivid imagery throughout the text; whether it be rage, pain, glory or loss, Homer wants you to feel the emotion just as if you were experiencing it yourself.

Another excellent example occurs when upon Hera's command, Hephaestus attacks the river: "He screamed in flames, his clear currents bubbling up / like a cauldron whipped by a crackling fire as it melts down / the lard of a fat swine, splattering up around the rim- / dry logs blazing under it, lasing it to the boil-"(21.410-414). The intensity of the river's suffering is emblazoned with the literary imagery that any audience member of Homer's time could relate to. Cooking on an open fire; the level of heat, the intensity of the boil, these are all visual things the audience members would have firsthand knowledge of. This level of imagery allows the audience to feel the strength of Hephaestus and become empathetic to the river's pain. Even today the imagery provided here is relatively timeless as modern readers will most likely have experience with fire and cooking over an open flame.

As with today's readers it is possible that not every audience member would have direct experience with combat and the brutality of war. In order to solidify the situations described in *The Iliad*, Homer again turns to his multi-lined similes and uses language that really hits home. To illustrate the massive scale of the Archaean army, and the degree of command Agamemnon has over his forces, Homer describes the response from the troops in the following passage: "So he commanded / and the armies gave a deep resounding roar like waves / crashing against a cliff when the South Wind whips it, / bearing down, some craggy headland jutting out to sea / the waves will never leave it in peace, trashed by gales / that hit from every quarter, breakers left and right" (2.468-474). The visualization of waves repeatedly crashing, and whipped up by gale force winds is so

powerful you can almost hear the deafening roar of the water. The response from the troops is undeniable. This simile demonstrates the power of Agamemnon's speech, as he commands the troops to his will. The troops responding with a resounding acknowledgment of his command. This is often an expected response between a military commander and his troops, as the commander orders, and the troops respond "Oorah." Although commonplace knowledge nowadays because of tv and film, a person not privy to the workings of a military unit make not be able to visualize the utterly overwhelming response without such a metaphor.

As with many of his similes, Homer uses situations in which a layperson can relate to experiences on the battlefield. When Patroclus is fighting Sarpedon in book sixteen, Patroclus lands a "mortal hit" killing Sarpedon. Homer again invokes an epic simile to describe the brutality of Patroclus' blow: "He struck him right where the midriff packs the pounding heart / and down Sarpedon fell as an oak or white poplar falls / or towering pine that shipwrights up on a mountain / hew down with whetted axes for sturdy ship timber" (16.569-573). Ancient Greek culture would have a familiarity with axes in terms of industry, like the shipwrights who cut timber for ships. This is an excellent example of bringing a battlefield situation into a world of which most of the audience could personally understand. The force needed to fell a tree is tangible, as you can almost feel the weight of the ax in your hands. The muscle memory of such a powerful blow. This indeed captures the seriousness of battle, as it solidifies the mortality of war.

Homer stays true to the concept of providing the audience with a tangible representation of the story by invoking common situations that the Greeks would be intimately familiar with. In the dialog between Paris and Hector, after Paris's cowardly retreat, Homer again uses the description of an ax swung by a shipwright to describe Hector's heart, as viewed by Paris: "The heart inside you is always tempered hard, / like an ax that goes through wood when a shipwright / cuts out ship timbers with every ounce of skill / and the blade's weight drives the man's stroke" (3.72-75). Again; the very feel, the weight of the blade, the force from a massive blow is felt by every audience member. The more relatable the simile describes a situation, the more likely an audience member will be captivated by the performance. Rather than telling the audience how Paris feels at that moment, Homer allows us a window into Paris's emotional view of Hector's heart.

Consistently throughout *The Iliad*, we are presented with poetic similes that invoke tangible feelings. Just as the best stories today pull you in, capture your imagination, pull on your heartstrings, make you feel joy or sorrow, Homer's expert use of metaphorical language allows his audience to become emotionally involved in the story, and allows the audience to fully understand the brutality of war. These small vignettes may sometimes feel burdensome to today's readers, but were an important part of storytelling in Homer's time. Without the use of today's technology (CGI, animation, etc.), it would have been imperative to provide the audience with a mental image of scenes and characters. Homer does this brilliantly with his epic similes, bringing abstract situations down to reality, in order for his audience to fully connect to the story being told.

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#### Works Cited

Homer. *The Iliad*. Translated by Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin, 1990.