

Spring 2018

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Recommended Citation

Yun, Jenny (2018) "The Iliad," *ESSAI*: Vol. 16 , Article 31.
Available at: <https://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol16/iss1/31>

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The Iliad

by Jenny Yun

(English 1159)

Setting:

Six students huddle together in their small group to discuss *The Iliad*, more specifically the violence they read within the epic poem and how it may relate to modern acts of violence

Characters:

Jamie
Kathy
Barry
Shelby
Tyler
Hannah

Shelby: We recently finished reading about the violence within Homer's epic poem *The Iliad*. Is it possible to compare it to the violence we experience today?

Hannah: I mean, yeah, I think it is because weapons and warfare change but pure humanistic tendency to crave violence doesn't change.

Tyler: Hannah, are you basically saying that it is human nature to love violence?

Hannah: Yes, because we all have something we fight for. In the modern world we fight for our nation, for our families, and for our future. In *The Iliad* Athena gave the Achaeans the courage to keep fighting as stated in Book 2, lines 532 -538,

Her shield of lightning dazzling, swirling around her, /headlong on Athena swept through the Argive armies, /driving soldiers harder, lashing the fighting-fury/ in each Achean's heart—no stopping them now, /mad for war and struggle. Now, suddenly, / battle thrilled them more than the journey home, /than sailing hollow ships to their dear native land.

Athena, known as the goddess of war and wisdom, is Ares' counterpart. She loved the good fight and was described throughout *The Iliad* as a fierce, angry, and cruel warrior. Athena gave the Achaeans a slight push to keep fighting, and once she did, they continued the bloodshed without much encouragement. Meaning she might have urged them, but they fought for their own personal gains.

Barry: I'm going to add onto Hannah's point that we humans crave violence, if you don't mind, of course.

Hannah: Not at all, continue.

Barry: There are so many examples throughout history of our cruel nature such as the genocides we have had in the last seventy or so years, the most notable being the Holocaust during World War Two, the Cambodian genocide of the late 1970's, and the Rwandan(Tutsi) Genocide of 1994. Other examples of extreme violence are the hundreds of murders we have in our nation each year, and how our country keeps fighting useless wars. My point being that humans crave violence because it gives us power over another.

Kathy: What do you mean by that?

Barry: The act of taking a life is the greatest power humans can ever possess because killing another person goes against our natural biological tendencies. Humans are programmed to feel emotions that deter us from committing acts of violence because we are empathic to others and we feel immense guilt in taking a life. Basically wars, genocides, and homicides are all power plays in the sense that we all want control. Some dictators, warlords, and others in powerful positions might say that the genocides and wars were just a cleansing of the nation to make it better, but how is killing innocent civilians not considered an extreme act of violence? Isn't that how governments silence the people through fear and ignorance?

Tyler: I totally agree with Barry; we never really get over taking a life. I have heard of medical professionals who cry with the families after they fail to save someone, and how some soldiers who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder because of all the violence they witness over and over again. A better example is my uncle who is a police officer. During his career he had to use deadly force on someone who was a danger to public safety. When he came home that night he sobbed on my aunt's shoulder. He was a trained officer crying because he shot someone. An act of violence leads to another and as Herbert Hoover once said, "Older men declare war. But it is the youth that must fight and die."("Herbert")

Kathy: Let's move on now shall we? What did you guys think of the description of Menelaus when he saw Paris in Book 3, lines 25-29: "Atreides thrilled/ like a lion lighting on some handsome carcass, /lucky to find an antlered stag or wild goat/ just as hunger strikes--he rips it, bolts it down, / even with running dogs and lusty hunters rushing him."

Shelby: Personally, I thought it was a bit too much to compare Menelaus to a hungry lion because I understand that Paris stole Helen from him, but is Helen really worth it to Menelaus for him to be described as a wild deranged animal?

Jamie: To answer your question Shelby, yes, Helen was worth it because first off she was considered the most beautiful female, and second, women were considered nothing more than property during this time period. Therefore, stealing Helen from Menelaus is like someone going to your house and stealing your \$4,000 television along with your brand new \$34,000 car. Sure she could have been replaced, but the biggest reason, in my opinion, why it is worth it to Menelaus to be described as a wild deranged animal is because of pride.

Kathy: So you interpreted the violent scenes as acts of pride. Could you explain that a bit more because it is hard to see a brutal killing spree as an act of pride?

Jamie: In Book 16 Achilles agrees to lend Patroclus his armor and men so that they may drive the Trojan forces away from the ships. Wearing Achilles' armor, Patroclus is basically a moving target: the way this relates to pride is because Achilles's armor is quite recognizable, meaning he had to live up to the hype of Achilles and do his name justice. In Book 16 lines 480-489 Homer describes Patroclus as he is in battle:

“Patroclus rising beside him stabbed his right jawbone,/Ramming the spearhead square between his teeth so hard/he hooked him by that spearhead over the chariot rail,/hoisted, dragged the Trojan out as an angler perched/on a jutting rock ledge drags some fish from the sea,/some noble catch, with line and glittering bronze hook./So with the spear Patroclus gaffed him off his car,/his mouth gaping round the glittering point/and flipped him down facefirst/dead as he fell, his life breath blown away.”

Shelby: Oh, yeah, I remember that scene. As I was reading, I was thinking that all these acts of violence were childish, as if stabbing a man through the mouth wasn’t enough, Patroclus in Book 16, lines 491-494 is described as continuing to mutilate the body of Sarpedon; “He flung a rock and it struck between his eyes / and the man's whole skull split in his heavy helmet,/ down the Trojan slammed on the ground, head down/ and courage-shattering Death engulfed his corpse.” I thought it was quite brutal the way Patroclus killed Sarpedon, but then again, Achilles, is compared to the god of war, Ares when he avenges the death of Patroclus as Homer states in Book 20 lines 554-559:

“Achilles now/ like inhumane fire raging on through the mountain gorges splinter-dry, setting ablaze big stands of timber, /the wind swirling the huge fireball left and right-/chaos of fire-Achilles storming on with brandished spear/ like a frenzied god of battle trampling all he killed/ and the earth ran black with blood”

But am I really the only one who thought the acts of violence were a bit childish? Literally, this whole war was started because Paris stole Menelaus’ shiny new toy(Helen)and Menelaus wanted his toy back. So he gets his older brother, Agamemnon, to gather up all of his friends and go seek revenge against Paris and the Trojans. Also before you say anything about the whole pride thing, I already heard it when you said it the first time, Jamie.

Barry: While on the subject of Achilles, what did you guys think about Hector’s death and the way Achilles treated the corpse?

Hannah: Let me just start off with this: Achilles is such a child! I mean, literally, he sulked the majority of the poem only to come and fight to avenge his friend. Like really? I understand that Hector stole his armor from the body of his best friend, but to mutilate Hector's body as stated in Book 22, lines 466-472:

“So he triumphed/and now bent on outrage, on shaming noble Hector. /Piercing the tendons, ankle to heel behind both feet, /he knotted straps of rawhide through them both, lashed them to his chariot, left the head to drag/ and mounting the car, hoisting the famous arms aboard, / he whipped his team to a run and breakneck on they flew, holding nothing back.”

Like seriously, he poked a hole through Hector’s tendon and attached him, like some animal he just hunted and killed, to his chariot and dragged him in plain view of not only his parents, but also Hector’s wife. That is just plain childish, like Shelby said, and also it’s plain cruel!

Tyler: I know, right? After Hector begged Achilles to return his dead body to the gates of Troy so that he may have his rites and proper burial, Achilles says to Hector, in Book 22, line 417 “The dogs and birds will rend you-blood and bone”. Since the ancient Greeks believed the way your body was at death is how you shall remain in the afterlife meaning the last rites and a proper burial were important in order to not insult the dead(Mark). Which can explain why Apollo pitied Hector when he helped him out in Book 24 lines 21-25: “But Apollo pitied Hector-/dead man though he was-and warded all corruption off/ from Hector’s corpse and round him, head to foot, / the great god wrapped

the golden shield of storm/ so his skin would never rip as Achilles dragged him on” The gods and goddesses intervened so often during this poem. Sometimes it was for good reason and sometimes for stupid reasons. Sure, Apollo did send a plague to punish the mortals, however, I feel that Apollo’s pity is admirable because Apollo is the only sane one. Since he saw Achilles as a mortal who has let his mom’s influence and Athena’s favor get to his head. Apollo by saving Hector’s corpse, is finally setting something right in the mess that was the Trojan War.

Jamie: Ok, moving on, I have a question for you guys. Due to the violence we see and experience today, do you think it made us immune or blind to violence?

Barry: I don’t think we’ll ever really be immune to it. Rather we are starting to just not care about the violence because we all have a common mindset that as long as the violence doesn’t influence our daily lives it doesn’t really deserve a second thought.

Shelby: Also think about all the video games we play or how modern movies and music all have references to extreme violence such as shooting, rape, gangs, and drugs. Compared to the poem, there is not much difference in the way violence is depicted because *The Iliad* had people’s body parts being cut off and murdered. The modern society has gunshot wounds leading to a person’s death.

Kathy: I disagree with you, Barry. I feel like the violence we experience today has made us more conscious of the issue of violence. You said that as long as our daily lives are unaffected we do not care. But the thing is all, past examples of violence are the reasons why we are wary of some groups of people or why, when we travel on an airplane or go to a public event, we are thoroughly searched. Also our actions and conversations are continually monitored by our government. As for popular culture and the way violence is described, I understand where you are coming from. We see so many stupid acts of violence, whether it be in video games or movies, that we really stopped caring because it is no longer shocking to turn on the news and see a report about a shooting in which x amount of people were killed. Which is why now is the time to fight back to raise our concerns to Congress. If we don’t fight back now, a few years down the road we are no longer going to be humans.

(Slowly conversations quiet down as everyone refocuses their attentions towards the front of the class as it is time to report out what the students have been discussing.)

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