

A Crisis of Meaning in Homer's *The Iliad*: Man's Eventual Demise

A jet of light bolting across a blackened sky. Terror.

When lightning first struck the earth we feared it. We revered it; the god's were angry. It is human nature to try and explain that which we cannot comprehend. But this trait goes far beyond scientific phenomenons; there are pieces of ourselves that we do not *wish* to know. That we are capable of harming others. Killing others. That we enjoy it. Even crave it. What person wants to delve into these truths, face the most gruesome of human reality? And so, we have done what any intelligent species would, convinced ourselves otherwise. Found a cause. Placed blame. Religion was created as a scapegoat for humanity.

In Homer's epic poem, *The Iliad*, the mortals and empowered beings alike, speak to the idea of "free will" and its role in convincing ourselves of human morality. The characters often find themselves looking to, thanking, and blaming the gods, all for those actions which they themselves have brought about. Lost the war? The gods have fated me so. It is easy to see the appeal of an all-controlling power. No blame is too small for the petty and argumentative overseers of our land. But fate holds the power of not only negating our role in our actions, but in our darkest thoughts and desires as well. Have a lust for power? Found to be a talented and ruthless warrior? Words such as cruel and greedy need not apply when you claim to have been gifted so by the gods themselves. Who is a mere mortal to question the divine? The gods in Homer's poem serve to battle the idea that humans are inherently evil creatures, with a desire for fame, materialism, and the domination of others.

The epic, at its core, is a tale of battle. A war fought over the beauty that is Helen. However, at many instances throughout its lines, characters question the reasoning behind the

bloodshed. Why is this war taking place? Yes, over Helen. But who actually wants it besides those directly involved with the Trojan beauty? “Why must we battle Trojans, men of Argos? Why did he muster an army, lead us here, that son of Atreus? Why, why in the world if not for Helen with her loose and lustrous hair? Are *they* the only men alive who love their wives, those sons of Atreus” (Homer 263)? This brings us to the idea of divine intervention. Have the gods forced the mortals to fight through fate? “Father Zeus, they say you excel all others... all men and gods, in wisdom clear and calm – but all this brutal carnage comes from *you*” (Homer 361). “They *have* to obey his orders. It’s their fate” (Homer 394). Does free will cause those on the battlefield to choose to fight, but the deities favor some soldiers? “He’d never be at the front, smashing our lines unless Old Thunder, Zeus, had put him on his feet” (Homer 397). “Oh what luck – look, some power cuts us out of the fighting, foils our plans” (Homer 402). “I’ll finish you off next time if one of the gods will only urge *me* on as well” (Homer 517). Or is it all a fabrication, a means to justify the human need to kill? Many mortals truly believe that they are fated to fight, fated even to die, for a war they do not necessarily support. When tested with the idea of sailing homebound, the brave are far too quick to drop their spears. “Cut and run! Sail home to the fatherland we love! We’ll never take the broad streets of Troy... And the whole assembly surged like big waves at sea...they cried in alarm and charged towards the ships” (Homer 104). Any so-called “warrior” would laugh in the face of such cowardly actions. So, if they do not wish to be fighting, they must be *forced* to fight, right? However, more than a desire to kill is at play here. While the want to murder is beyond the scope of admitted human decency, the want to obtain both material and figurative gain is not. “You can win great honor, great glory... and top it off with troves of glittering gifts” (Homer 415). Those who long to be back with their wives loose no time in stripping the armor of fallen corpses. “Their chests gleamed

like bronze as he stripped them bare” (Homer 299). “Teucer charged forward, mad to strip that gear... and Hector rushed to tear the helmet off his head” (Homer 347). No sleep is lost over nostalgia when a spot in history is at stake. The gods serve as more than an excuse for man’s incessant need to kill and imperialize, but also as justification for humankind’s greedy and power-obsessed nature.

But what of the characters that do not seem tempted with treasures and kills? Surely they exist, for Homer paints a fantastical world with dynamic and varied inhabitants. However, those who lack a need for the “immortal excuse” are interestingly characterized as effeminate in nature. Although the poem focuses on the strife of Greece’s “most powerful” warrior, Achilles, there is a peculiar reoccurring concentration on the “weaker” and feminized mortals; Homer characterizes them as soft, yet never negative. Is it that these men are the true questioners of religion in Homer’s eyes? “Father Zeus – so even *you* are an outright liar after all” (Homer 330)! Does it not make one weak in this patriarchal world to refuse the call to battle? To wish for peace? And would this cowardice not be a direct refusal of the so-called “will” enforced upon them? Patroclus, Paris, and the other mortals deemed “feminine” thus become the first to question the idea of religion. By lacking any requirement for a higher power, due to their inherent moral superiority, they simultaneously support the fact that the gods exist only to explain away the negatives. “A man who can cut out shafts and dress our wounds – a good healer is worth a troop of other men” (Homer 313). “And let him give you his own fine armor to wear in war so the Trojans might take *you* for him” (Homer 323). When faced with a Christ-like figure, benevolence, and selflessness, the beings above hold no power at all. One does not need humanity explained away at Zeus’ mighty hand.

While characters such as Paris continue to expose the true roots of religion, it is the women, in their silence, who have come to utter clarification on the true nature of the gods. In the model surrounding Zeus and his children, rationality is the acceptance and obedient pursuit of one's fate, bolstered by prayer and sacrifice to the ones who hold all of the cards. However, it is said that the only characteristic to overcome rationality is that of emotionality. Only when blinded by grief do the gods fear Achilles: "If Achilles fights the Trojans – unopposed by us – not for a moment will they hold back his breakneck force. Even before now they'd shake to see him coming. Now, with his rage inflamed for his friend's death, I fear he'll raze the walls against the will of fate" (Homer 504). And who is deemed a more emotional creature than the woman herself? It is due to this emotional description that Homer is able to garner all of the power to a gender utterly silenced along the six-hundred-page journey. Although rarely seen and even more seldom heard, Homer's female characters prove to have realized the truth, or lack thereof, in religion. Helen claims most significance, as she is the female whose words we are privied to at length. "If only death had pleased me then, grim death, that day I followed your son to Troy, forsaking my marriage bed, my kinsmen and my child... whore that I am" (Homer 134). In admitting her role in the war, and taking the blame for the death and destruction, Helen expunges all faults from that of the deities and thus all power as well. She, her beauty encompassing the hearts of two men, is the reason for the decade of battle. Not fate. Not divine power. But a woman, and her wiles. A whore? Maybe. But a force to be reckoned with... no doubt. And Hera serves the same purpose in the realm of the gods. As the most represented female deity, it is Hera who tricks Zeus into lust and slumber, causing him to grant his power to his wife and queen. "What a disaster you create! Uncontrollable Hera – you and your treachery" (Homer 388). She is

fully aware that the gods, being a creation of mankind, are subject to human weakness, and plays upon this fact to alter the course of the war.

Toward the culmination of the epic, Homer depicts man's need to explain away his evils through the images of the shield of Achilles. "A great and massive shield, blazoning well-wrought emblems all across its surface, raising a rim around it... and five layers of metal to build the shield itself, and across its vast expanse with all his craft and cunning the god creates a world of gorgeous immortal work" (Homer 483). Depictions of war and peace. Celebration, destruction, mankind, and nature all grace the gilded weapon. But why? Why so intricate a design for an object meant to kill? Why try to shroud its true nature. And so, the shield becomes the physical representation of a crisis of meaning. There is so much detail, so many varying images of contrasting scenarios, that all-in-all there is nothing. At one point all things become too large and cease to exist at all. Thus the shield directly correlates to the gods. They hold so much power, that ultimately they garner none. Being of human creation, their power serves as all. A means to justify human behavior, and solidify man's "rightful" power. But serving as all, they also serve as nothing greater than a mere tactic to hide the truth. A shield to hide behind, so to speak, with its dazzling web of confusion blocking mankind from those who may question his strength.

And, with this realization, man must face the most frightful of all evils, himself. "It's no longer a ghastly war for Troy and Achaea- now, I tell you, the Argives fight the gods" (Homer 176)! Without the gods and the idea of fate, humankind is left to look upon their own desire for war and materialism. "But I am not to blame! Zeus and Fate and the Fury stalking through the night, *they* are the ones who drove that savage madness in my heart" (Homer 491). Without this fabricated justification, the warrior of Achilles twists into a mindless-killing machine. Cruel and

incapable of empathy. Paris is nothing more than weak, cowardly, and pitiful. Agamemnon, racked with greed and selfish morals. These characters, distorted by their fated short-comings and immortal relatives are asked to look upon themselves in honesty... will they seek to share their reflection? "No comfort could reach the fighter's heart till he went striding into the jaws of bloody war" (Homer 498). Or will they be haunted by the truth?

Homer's poem serves as an allegory of human nature, the horrors we possess, and the lengths we will go to avoid our true selves. But for how long can we suppress our desires by calling them the will of a higher being? How long can we lie to ourselves? At one point, the fabrication will become too much. Genocide, racism...these and more will weaken the shield we have created to block our true nature until we are blinded by the truth. Will we be able to handle it, or will it serve as our demise?

Works Cited

Homer. *The Iliad*. New York: Penguin Books, 1990. 77-614. Print.