

# Lecture Series on Homer's *Iliad*: Lecture 10

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## **Homer's *Iliad***

### **Introduction**

*Iliad* and *Odyssey* are two classical Greek epics attributed to Homer, and believed to be written around 8th century BCE. According to M H Abrams, an epic poem is “a long verse narrative on a serious subject, told in formal and elevated style, and centered on a heroic or quasidivine figure on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, nation, or the human race.” The *Iliad* consists of 24 books.

## ***Iliad* as an Epic**

In Homer's *Iliad* both Gods and mortals play an equally important role. The epic opens "in medias res." i.e., in the middle of action, and begins with invocation to the muses. There is a war going on between Achaeans and the Trojans. The epic opens on the tenth and the final year of the war. The war has been going on for nine years, and it reaches its conclusion in the tenth year. The war between the Achaeans and the Trojans started when Paris, the prince of Troy, younger son of King Priam seduces Helen, the wife of the Spartan king Menelaus, and brings her to Troy.

On the side of the Trojans, there are King Priam, his older son, Hector, and Paris. The Achaeans have a much larger army with Menelaus, his brother, Agamemnon, the wise king Nestor, the courageous Odysseus, the daring Patroclus, and above all, Achilles, son of Thetis, and the bravest warrior.

## **The Role of Gods**

As the epic opens, the Trojans, blessed by the mighty Apollo, seem to have an upper hand over the Achaeans. It is crucial to note here that at this point in the epic, Achilles is not participating in the war due to a tiff with Menelaus. But when Hector kills his dear friend Patroclus, Achilles is inconsolable and vows to take revenge. Meanwhile, the Gods continue to participate in the war. For example, in Book 2, when the Achaeans begin to retreat, dissuaded by a series of failures. Athena inspires Odysseus to call the men back. Likewise, Aphrodite is on the side of the Trojans. And in Book 3, when Menelaus catches Paris by his helmet, Aphrodite snaps the helmet's straps. The helmet comes loose in Menelaus' hands and Paris is spared.

## **The Role of Supernatural Elements**

Just like Gods play an important role in the Iliad, prophecies and omens also play an important role. In Book 2, Zeus makes Agamemnon to have a dream, in which a figure appearing to be Nestor, encourages the Spartan king to carry out a full-scale attack on Troy. In Book 8, Agamemnon prays to Zeus, and Zeus gives him a sign in the form of an eagle with a fawn in its talons. This sign encourages the Achaeans to move forward. In Book 10, Athena sends a heron to the Trojans. It is on their right hand side, and is perceived to be a good sign.

## The War

*Iliad* is the depiction of war and thus it is an epic containing much action. The action moves back and forth, and initially the Trojans seem to outfight the Achaeans. But with the aid of Gods, and with much superior military prowess, ultimately Troy falls at the hands of the Greeks / Achaeans. And like a classical war epic, in *Iliad*, the war has been glorified. This is in complete opposition to contemporary war literature which brings out the futility of war. In fact, in *Iliad*, the greatest virtue in man is understood to be bravery and courage. Homer proudly claims, "Everything is more beautiful because we're doomed. You will never be lovelier than you are now. We will never be here again." Elsewhere he writes, "Let me not then die ingloriously and without a struggle, but let me first do some great thing that shall be told among men hereafter." Thus, glory is sought as the greatest prize of war, and to be cowardly, the worst act. In Book 3, when Paris flees the battlefield, Helen chides/scold him for being a coward.

The war gains momentum when Achilles re-enters the war. The final duel between Achilles and Hector is a spectacle worthy of gods. After Achilles kills Hector and drags his corpse all over the battlefield, Achilles is himself killed by an arrow shot by Paris into his heel, the only part of his body that was vulnerable.

## ***Iliad* as a Philosophical Document**

Although *Iliad* is not an anti-war epic poem, it is rich in philosophy, especially that pertaining to the Homeric era. There is much discussion on the nature of death, and on how glory can be sought even in death. Homer writes, “Like the generations of leaves, the lives of mortal men. Now the wind scatters the old leaves across the earth, now the living timber bursts with the new buds and spring comes round again. And so with men: as one generation comes to life, another dies away.” Elsewhere, the brave Hector tells Andromache, “Why so much grief for me? No man will hurl me down to Death, against my fate. And fate? No one alive has ever escaped it, neither brave man nor coward, I tell you - it’s born with us the day that we are born.” It is evident that the concept of fate played an important role in Homeric canon.



## Conclusion

Homer's *Iliad* is an epic poem that deals with the final year of the Trojan war. It espouses courage as the greatest virtue. It brings the Gods and mortals fighting in the same arena. It is an epic poem dealing with human emotions, human frailties, and even human bravery. The epic poem is also deeply philosophical, providing a glimpse of Homeric ethos.