

Achilles as Tragic Hero of the *Iliad*

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Arnold grasped a new machine gun and a beautiful rhythmic choral resonated in the air. Surrounded by a sea of dead bodies, Arnold ran through the mud (there was so much blood) with only one thought in his head: “I hope I will get to her in time.” Finally, he got to his daughter and embraced her with his strong arms.

Beyond any doubt, Arnold belongs among the greatest heroes of today’s movies. But where can we find the subtle distinction, by which Achilles, hero of Homer’s classic *Iliad*, differs from Arnold and which gives him the attribute *tragic*? Certainly, it does not come from the amount of blood. . . . The handout *Tragedy: What It Is and What It Isn’t* by Mr. Eric Linder brings the main ideas, which constitute a tragic hero.

The critical difference that distinguishes Achilles from others and makes him a tragic hero lies in his opportunity for choice, his pursuit of the choice even to the point when he faces death, and thus his complete freedom. Achilles, alienated from the outside world by the original wrong of taking his favorite babe away, gradually undergoes changes in his character, and in the end gains “tragic wisdom about the meaning of life”: life is unfair, cope with it. Because, however, he clearly displays the desire to get honor and respect even after he rejects to return to battle, he still believes (though he sometimes does not realize

it) in the Homeric heroic ideal, which contrasts with his impulsiveness and his proclivity to pursue his will, regardless of the consequences.

As opposed to popular action-movie heroes, Achilles' character significantly changes during the few weeks of the story, for he experiences the contrasting life of a mortal god, and evolves through the story from a respected warrior disappointed by the king's wrong to a solitary denying honor's importance. His godlike peak comes on the battlefield when he is "flashing bright as a star" (22.34), but his revolt ends with accepting his own limits and the "strict law of Zeus" (24.680).

Achilles never behaves as an ordinary mortal, but his reactions are always exaggerated, inconceivable to both gods and mortals. Firstly, he does not care about the Achaean losses, and his best friend Patroclus accuses him of acting "so harsh and unfeeling [as] the gray salt-sea and . . . beetling cliffs of stone . . ." (9.39) Soon, however, Achilles lets his emotions control him completely, and bursts into terrible unparalleled rage, obscenely defiling the body of Patroclus' killer Hector, regardless of the reluctance of blood-thirsty gods.

It must follow that Achilles oscillates between gods' support and their resentment, but he still understands that they do not favor him because of his qualities, but because of their own disputes and his goddess-mother. Consequently, Achilles decides to act in agreement with the gods, respecting their law and judgment, although he hates them for isolating him from their world, wishing "would . . . I had the power to wreak / Vengeance on you . . ." (22.24). Hence he stays on the boundary of mortals' and gods' worlds without belonging to any of these and from here stems his loneliness.

Achilles falls from his godlike position when he comprehends that he is a man and has to die like everybody else. Although this annoys him, he accepts it and returns to the ideal of glory and honor. The reader is amazed when Achilles

alone fights with the river and its gods:

... the wave of the surging river outstripped
Achilles, fast though he was, for the gods are far stronger
Than men. . . . (21.288)

Therefore even Achilles—the best of men—must admit that he is not all-powerful, and he has to feel the limits of his existence.

Accordingly, the gods influence Achilles' life to such extent that he appears to be a puppet in their hands. He only follows Zeus' order when Priam comes to beg for Hector's body, but he still persuades himself that he alone approved it: "I myself . . . have already agreed to give / Hector back" (24.650). Consequently, his tragic defiance against social order changes to quiet approbation of gods' decision, and he loses his freedom.

Achilles was set before an important decision whether he wants to live a short life and gain glory, or live a long life; he therefore has what Linder calls "the power of free choice", necessary for a tragic hero. By choosing honor and short life, he can fully enjoy all his gifts and does not have to restrain himself from any desires—he acts freely, ready to accept his death "... whenever Zeus wills / To fulfill it . . ." (22.430).

The gods support Achilles in his free choice, for they do almost everything that he wishes, and thus the reality adapts itself to his prayers. Everybody else has to serve as a slave, as Achilles laughs at Odysseus when he refuses the Achaean gifts: "... let him / Make plans with you and the other chieftains. . . ." (9.391). Later, the gods take the power of free choice from Achilles by declining his prayer for the life of Patroclus, clearly declaring that they hold the sovereignty, and Achilles still belongs among their toys.

One of the main tragic elements of Achilles' character comes from the conflict between his dream for honor and his only friend. Because Achilles loves honor

so much, he sends Patroclus to battle, instructing him,

But pay close attention to this . . . that you may win
For me great honor and glory from all of the Danaans,
Making them bring back to me that exquisite girl
and give me in addition splendid gifts. (16.97)

How furious Achilles becomes when he recognizes that his greed for honor killed his only friend! And this “catastrophe ultimately occurs as a result of [Achilles’] action[s]” (Linder). Moreover, this command clearly indicates that he still desires respect and honor even after he doubted its importance and chose a long life. Hence he must have been lying to Odysseus and others when they were offering him splendid gifts, which demonstrates the complexity of his psychology.

Achilles continues to reflect the properties of a tragic hero when he “summon[s] up some sort of defiance or courage which stands out against the darkness” (Linder) when he, unlike many people, does not fear his death. He faces his obvious death, which resulted from his decisions, without giving up, thundering, “Then soon let me die!” (18.110).

Linder observes that a tragic hero cannot miss the “experience . . . of radical break . . . with [his] society and its values”. To protest against injustice, Achilles alienates himself from his society by living far away and refusing the offer of splendid gifts. Achilles, however, still believes in the value of honor and hopes that society has expelled him only temporarily (16.83). To humiliate his king Agamemnon and to prove himself worthy of honor, he demands king’s personal suffering.

Achilles’ loneliness arises from the initial conflict between king Agamemnon (a model representative of society) and Achilles (representative of gods). The king symbolizes the order on earth, and Achilles stands for the natural force

independent of human laws, seeking to show his superior honor by making the king personally suffer.

Achilles therefore refuses to follow the rules of honorable society to protest against his expulsion from it, and tries to manifest his power by not following the customs of his people. He illustrates it by refusing to speak to his foe Hector, since he considers himself a lion and Hector a man (22.301). His further resignation on the rules of society is underlined by his refusal to give Hector for ransom to his father.

Then his loneliness turns against the whole world—he despises the whole human kind! He hates society, which has caused all the problems. Achilles expresses his naive and childish (or heroic and demonic?) views in his prayer to gods,

[How] Deeply I wish the death of every Trojan ... and of every
Argive too,
That just myself and Patroclus might live and alone
Succeed in reducing [Troy] To rubble and dust! (16.113)

His loneliness culminates when he loses his only bond to the world—his friend Patroclus—and is left completely alone, not able to identify himself with any community, neither human, nor divine. By completing the only objective that relates Achilles to the world—his revenge to Hector—the poem, primarily about Achilles, logically ends (18.101).

The main point responsible for the attribute tragic comes from “gain[ing] what is sometimes called *tragic wisdom* about the meaning of life” (Linder). Eventually, Achilles finds mere existence exhausting and life terribly unjust, making it therefore ultimately frustrating to imagine how one “lives” *after* life; not to mention that thanks to Patroclus he sees that a quick death waits for him as well.

Achilles gets close to tragic wisdom when he wonders why he fights in a war without purpose (9.381) and why humans and gods are so violent; he is aware that as a result of the violence and anger the world bubbles over with suffering. But since he cannot even control his own aggression, he has to accept this suffering as an irremovable part of life.

Furthermore, he increases his despair by accusing the fate of being unjust by ignoring the human laws of honor, for “death comes just as surely to the soldier / Who labors much as it does to the unmanly sluggard” (9.360). From here he derives the uselessness of honor because honor comes from society, as opposed to life, whose origin reaches much deeper. This example particularly highlights the relativity of the rules of society, which change with time; the value of life, on the other hand, remains the same.

Finally, the death of Patroclus has a crucial impact on Achilles because through it he can understand his own death. Achilles proves this by defiling himself, which shows that he finally grasped the tragic wisdom that everybody (including him) has to die too and no heroic deeds can save one from death. Moreover, Patroclus’ death assures Achilles of his sealed fate because from now on there exists no way back.

These circumstances make Achilles believe that in this world he must suffer; because this is the way it works, and he cannot do anything about it. He reveals this wisdom in the dialog with Priam when he lectures the old man,

[You] must bear up, nor can you afford to grieve

Before you bring [Hector] back to life, you’ll suffer a fate

Little less unhappy yourself. (24.636)

This tragic wisdom taught him to believe that he does not have to follow the rules of people, but he has to stick to the rules of gods.

Achilles, though a mere warrior, asks philosophical questions about freedom, and his psychology surprises us with its depth. Although at the first glance one could argue that Achilles rejects the Homeric heroic ideal completely, I believe that he was only extremely offended and angry. Nevertheless, in the end he chose to follow the path of honor, and that brought him a posthumous life he could have never dreamed of.

Work cited

Homer. *The Iliad*. Translated by E. V. Rieu. New York: Barnes & Nobles Books, 2005.