

Final

Shakespeare p.1
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War: Glory and Greed

Throughout human history, war has represented a moral paradox: it glorifies the intentional killing of other peoples, celebrating murder, the ethically and socially most reprehensible of crimes. This is a theme common to all cultures, religions, and ages, Hellenic Greece included. In Homer's *Iliad*, the glorification of individual deeds and death in combat is contrasted with the brutally total devastation of battle, showing how war is a selfish and greedy enterprise for the individual that ignores the overall impact its waste has on others' lives. ★

How negative? Great heroes are exalted for their exploits in battle, but the shockingly bloody imagery of combat suggests a negative understanding of their deeds. When Hector charges Achilles with drawn sword it is as though "an eagle narrows himself to dive through shady cloud and strike a lamb or cowering hare" (pg. 525). The immediate reaction to this image of overwhelming power is of awe, the appreciation of inevitable destruction. Yet what is awesome may also be terrible, and though the illustration is of the natural order of life, the eagle's merciless attack on the defenseless lamb (a symbol of innocence) and the "cowering" rabbit is stomach-churning. Though Hector's charge may be heroic in bravery, it represents a violence and brutality that are very distasteful. This is by no means an isolated example of a hero behaving with a savageness that belies their "heroic nature;" Polydamas, a minor Trojan prince, strikes an Argive "just at the juncture of his neck and skull / the blow fell on his topmost vertebra / and cut both tendons through" (pg. 494). The striking violence implies an irony; although the soldiers are glorified for their deeds, the nature of those deeds is base and disgusting. Just as "Saving Private Ryan" - Great example expressed the horrors of a war celebrated in contemporary culture, the *Iliad* shows how little the example/episode for reader who may not have seen the film?

moral of war has changed over millennia. Old King Priam says it best, urging Hector not to face his demise at Achilles hands: "Everything done / to a young man killed in war becomes his glory, / once he is riven by the whetted bronze: / dead though he be, it is all fair, whatever happens then" (pg. 517). The individual deeds of a warrior will be remembered and retold for generations, but the impact those experiences and actions will have is an untold, and ultimately more important, saga.

Strong transition!

Homer does not shy from describing the larger impact of war, starkly contrasting the adrenaline-filled excitement of the battle field with strikingly poignant illustrations of its effects. Even Achilles, whose life is dedicated to violence, is struck by its cruelty when Patroclus dies, so much so that he "scattered dust and ash / in handfuls and befouled his beautiful face" (pg. 436). No one had ever been as perfectly crafted for battle as Achilles, no one had ever excelled in its slaughter as he did, yet it brings pain to its greatest champion. Nothing is more revealing about war's nature than its greatest champion crying in the dirt over its cruelty. The brutality of war is sustaining; Achilles responds to loss by causing others loss. Priam realizes the culmination of this conflict will be "my sons brought down, my daughters dragged away / bedchambers ravaged, and small children hurled / to earth in the atrocities of war" (pg. 517). Ironically, it is the commander, the man with the greatest power, who can most clearly see the damage his actions cause. A warrior will be buried with ceremony, but those who had no direct part in the violence will be the ones who pay the ultimate price of battle. War extends beyond those in armor, its shadow envelops all who love and depend on those men.

Men willingly flee into battle as it frees them from responsibilities, societal pressures, and expectations. The minor Trojan warrior Aeneas is faced with a quandary; face certain death at the hands of Achilles or bear the shame and embarrassment of fleeing the Achaean's blade,

saying "if I break / and run before Achilles like the others, / he'll take me, even so: I'll have my throat cut like a coward for my pains" (pg. 511). Aeneas ultimately chooses death, facing the unstoppable Achilles for the brief moment of glory it will bring him. Apollo save Aeneas through illusion, but the fact remains that Aeneas was willing to sacrifice his own life and the future of all who depend on him for pride. And war is a noble pursuit? Even the greatest heroes, like Hector, choose battle to hide from failings, admitting "I am ashamed to face townsmen and women...Better, when that time comes, / that I appear as he who killed Achilles / man to man, or else that I went down / fighting him to the end before the city" (pg. 519). Though Hector's devoted wife waits patiently for his return, he will throw his life away for personal pride. In doing so he ignores the needs and love of those who depend on him for survival; Andromache, Hector's wife, laments "the day that orphans [Hector's son] will leave [the boy] lonely" (pg. 531), a child forced to grow up alone because of his father's pride. The selfishness of Hector's actions is undeniable, revealing that what may be heroic in war is simply shameful in life. By extension, war's celebration of the flaws of society proves the basic injustice of its nature. In all, not exactly the most heroic of institutions.

But Hector knows that if the city falls his son is doomed to die. Is it truly selfishness?

Individual combat represents the microscopic elements of a greater conflict, and as such ignore the implications it has. War as a whole is the physical effect and emotional anguish of those combats sum, and in Homer's eyes is far from glorious. How does that same old lie *Dulce et decorum est / pro patria mori* sound in Greek? - nice