

### Civilization and Savagery in The Iliad

The urge to compete is a large part of the human psyche. When this sense of competitiveness is taken to the extreme, a war may erupt. Throughout the history of humanity wars have been waged, even before the advent of writing, when poets were there to capture their essence. The epic poem *The Iliad* by Homer describes a war that took place almost two thousand, seven hundred years ago. The Greek society in which Homer lived was considered more violent than any in existence today. This gave him all the inspiration needed to create an epic war poem. By revealing to the reader the futility and horror of war, Homer's *Iliad* offers an excellent critique of society, more specifically the fragility of human civilization and the savagery of human nature, when under the extreme pressures of combat. This masterful piece of literature, although written in many centuries ago, has much insight on ancient Greek society that can still be applied, with a modern twist, to today's world.

The style Homer used in his epic poem was unconventional and highly successful. Compared to many other novels or poem of its time, as well as most modern pieces of literature, *The Iliad* is much longer. This both helps and hinders the text's ability to convey the messages and meanings of war. In order to capture and preserve the audiences' interest during such a long poem, Homer took the reader on adventures beyond the Trojan battle field and into the life of each individual soldier. By doing this, the reader feels drawn into the story and shares the horrors and futility the Greeks faced during the Trojan War. A large part of Homer's work is dedicated to war and battle scenes. The main reason for this is because many believed Greek society, which took place seven hundred years before Christ, was brutally violent. Fighting was an everyday occurrence and brought honour among the warriors. The Greek gods did not dissipate the violent society; in fact they encouraged it by demanding animal sacrifices as part of daily rituals. It is this bloodlust, along with Homer's original style, that has made *The Iliad* popular and highly influential to this day.

War stories depict, through their graphic imagery, the horrors and tragedies taking place during a battle and *The Iliad* is no exception. *The Iliad* is most effective at portraying the futility and horrors of war throughout the text with all the gory details. Homer does an excellent job at capturing the realism of each battle scene in over five

thousand lines of prose, nearly one third of the poem. As critic Martin Muller points out in *Fighting in the Iliad* “the poet and his audience like such [battle] scenes and their periodic occurrence require no greater motivation than bar-room brawls in a Western”.

The following quote illustrates Homers ability to evoke graphic images during a battle:

The shaft pierced the tight belt's twisted thongs,  
piercing the blazoned plates, piercing the guard  
he wore to shield his loins and block the spears,  
his best defense—the shaft pierced even this,  
the tip of the weapon grazed the man's flesh,  
and dark blood came spurting from the wound. (pg149, p2)

This quote gives the reader a clear image of what is happening as the shaft wounds the unfortunate soldier. Homer also adds to the horrors of the war by telling us about the history of each individual soldier before their death. With about two hundred and fifty names in the text, all with individual stories behind their life or death, the story may become murky but never unemotional. Many times a character will be introduced only to be killed off within the same chapter. This adds to the death, destruction and ultimately the horror of the war the Greeks and the Trojans are fighting.

As well as reminding the reader of the horrors of war, Homer tells of the futility of fighting such a bloody battle. The sense of frustration and futility of the war is clearly shown as the Greeks fight the Trojans for more than nine years on end. With war comes death, a fact that resounds throughout *the Iliad*:

While Euchenor knew that boarding the ships for Troy  
meant certain death: his father told him so...  
time and again the strong old prophet said that  
he'd die in his own halls of a fatal plague  
or go with the ships and die at Trojan hands. (pg362, p3)

In this quote, describing the life of a soldier before he is killed, we see that his efforts during the war appear pointless. He could have met a similar dishonourable death by staying home and enjoying his life. Death represents the futility of fighting a war because it is the only guaranteed result. Monarch Notes tells that “since death is a constant presence in life we may better see how men value their lives when they are close to that presence”. Homer does an excellent job of bringing the reader down to the battle so that the futility of war can be closely felt.

The element that ties the violence and waste of war together in *The Iliad* is the imagery of fire. Almost every battle scene can be related to the wrath, anger and futility by observing these images. From the very start of the poem Homer sets this tone with the symbol of fire:

First he went for the mules and circling dogs but then,  
launching a piercing shaft at the men themselves,  
he cut them down in droves—  
and the corpse-fires burned on, night and day, no end in  
sight. (pg79, p1)

In this instance Homer is commenting on the futility and waste of war by showing us the burning corpses after they have been shot with arrows of plague. He suggests, through this passage and many others, that war is not worth the price the Greeks have paid in lives. Once again, as civilization degenerates the imagery of fire grows stronger to represent the primal urges overtaking the soldiers. The element of fire is not only sown as the humans battle on the plains of Troy but, in book twenty one, the gods of fire and water battle as well. During this battle the imagery of fire is most dominant as two immortal gods futilely fight to their death, killing anything that comes between them. Homer's symbolic imagery of fire helps to guide the reader and forces them to recognize the futility and horror occurring throughout the war.

Through the descriptive recounting of the horrors and futility of the Trojan War, *The Iliad* sends messages to the reader critiquing the society in which Homer lived. The most prominent of these messages is that human civilization becomes fragile when dealing with the horrors of war. In the case of *The Iliad*, Homer shows how one man's anger can be extended to whole peoples and cities to facilitate a war:

Now Paris and Menelaus, Atride loved by Ares,  
will fight it out with their rugged spears for Helen,  
and Helen and all her treasures go to the man who wins.  
(pg137 p1)

This is the turning point where civilization starts to disappear. In this scene the two men, Paris, Helen's captor, and Menelaus, Helen's husband, who both love Helen are challenged to fight against each other. The whole concept of civilization is questioned as a campaign is mounted toward a town because its leader stole a Greek's wife. As the

story continues, the civilized manor in which the soldiers once behaved quickly turns to savage impulses. During the first battle scene, beginning in book two, many fighters battle with honour, facing each other and duelling without interference from the rest of the army. As the poem progresses the battle scenes become more gruesome and honour and civility are forgotten. In book eleven Homer compares the armies to two rows of harvesters with sickles, cutting each other down without honour. Throughout the book Homer tells of the fragility of civilization by demonstrating how fast it can completely vanish.

Another good criticism Homer makes about the world in which he lives, is that as civilization and order deteriorates, man becomes overpowered by savage animal instincts. As the battle rages on, the soldiers become less and less civilized, and no longer kill out of necessity but out of pleasure. In the first chapter we see Achilles holding back his urge to kill the king, when civilization and honour have not been replaced by instinct. A good example of civilization falling apart and savagery overtaking sanity occurs after Achilles loses his best friend:

I've dragged Hector here for the dogs to rip him raw—  
and here in front of your flaming pyre I'll cut the throats  
of a dozen sons of Troy in all their shining glory,  
venting my rage on them for your destruction! (pg560, p1)

Here civilization has crumbled and Achilles does not appear “to [rise] from barbarism to an enlightened stage of development” to become a civilized person (according to *The American Heritage Dictionary*). Instead he seems content to satisfy his primal, savage, urges of rage and revenge. Homer does an excellent job of portraying the madness and savagery that develops within the characters as the world around them becomes less and less civilized.

It is no coincidence that these messages are still relevant today. Homer felt the role of his poetry was to explain and to justify the evil in human life – an evil that still exists today. Helen says that “Zeus has set this horrible fate upon us so that we may be the subjects of song for later generations” (pg207 p1) and she is right. Homer wished to deliver timeless messages through his oral and written epics so that future generations would be able to learn from the Greeks. To a certain point he has succeeded. Men no longer wage war (only small battles) over women and rage no longer drive armies. There

are also many anti-war activists that promote peace and civilized negotiations versus their bloody counterpart. Charles Rowan Beye tells the best reason why *The Iliad* remains popular among modern audiences in *Homer*:

In ages that no longer have such bloodshed as part of their daily fare, the poem remains popular because it speaks to the anguished realization of the great nothingness of death that besets the young, by whom nothing yet has been accomplished, and lays to rest the compulsion to perform.  
(pg8, p2)

But many modern war novels still portray horrors that take place during the wars of our century and the savagery of human nature is still in existence. Although Homer and his literature have opened our eyes as to how quickly our civilization can turn to savagery, society must still learn how to control this conversion.

If there were any benefits from fighting a war that lasted over nine years, Homer did not speak of them. He did not tell of economic boosts, political gains or technological advancements. There were no tales of friends bonding during the war, or lovers re-united after it. Instead this epic poem bombarded the senses with death, carnage and killing, pausing only briefly to inform the reader of great tragedy and sadness. Throughout the six hundred page epic, Homer never lets the reader forget the horrors of fighting a futile war or the fragility of human 'civilization' and how quickly it can transform into human savagery. As the poem resounds throughout history and modern society, Homer's fiery message of the savagery of war has been delivered. All we must do is listen.

Word Count: 1,989

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