

‘How heroic do you find the character of Achilles?’

A hero is more than just a character that is especially noble, courageous, self-sacrificing etc. A hero is also a protagonist, a character to whom we can relate, and with whom we can sympathise. Ultimately a hero is a character with which we can identify, and an example which each of us wishes to follow.

Achilles often appears to be such a character. Of all the Homeric heroes, he is by far the most passionate and emotional. When begging his mother to help him in book 1 he speaks “with tears falling”. His protection of Briseis and his honour is extreme. He goes to the lengths of withdrawing from the fighting, even though “his heart yearned for battle”, he causes and endures the suffering his fellow Argives, and he speaks affectionately of Briseis as his “wife” – in stark contrast to Agamemnon’s relationship with Chryseis, whose purpose Agamemnon describes as to “serve my bed”.

Achilles is also a great man, and has a god-like status within his army. It is Achilles who calls the assembly to discuss how to end the plague in the Greek camp and it is Achilles who protects Kalchas from Agamemnon.

But the character of Achilles in book 9 is anything but heroic. His ears to deaf to three impassioned pleas of his dear friends Odysseus, Ajax and Phoinix, his tutor. He is offered all that has been taken from him: his girl, Briseis; women from Lesbos, the island which he captured and from which Agamemnon took the prizes, he is offered riches and glory beyond measure, as well as the chance to win a heroic victory, to gain the glory that he so badly desires – “the Achaians will honour you like a god”. In this passage there can be no sympathy for Achilles. His anger at Agamemnon’s insult in book 1 can be understood. But by book 9 he has got what he wanted: the Trojans are winning, Agamemnon has realised his mistake [although admittedly none of those coming to Achilles make any offer of a public apology by Agamemnon], and he could have all that he had lost. In book 1 Achilles’ stubborn attitude could be excused as heat of the moment (we are after all, talking about Achilles whom Peleus urged to control “your heart’s high passion”), and in book 1 Achilles is perhaps unaware of at least unthinking of the consequences of his actions (i.e. the death of many Danaans).

Achilles’ real crime is to let his personal quarrel with Agamemnon get in the way of his duty to his friends. As Odysseus says “But if your hatred for the son of Atreus has grown too strong in your heart... then still have pity on the other Achaians of the army in their affliction”.

However, the story of Achilles does not end in book 9. By the end of book 22 he has atoned for many of his previous sins. He has conquered his heart’s high passion and finally returned to the fighting. He has totally reversed the tide of the war, forcing the Trojans to take shelter inside Troy. The killing of Hektor is in fact unremarkable given the support of Pallas Athene and earlier statements – “once he stood up to me alone, and barely escaped my attack”. What is remarkable is that Achilles in fact sees the defeat of Hektor as a triumph for the whole Greek army, not just personal revenge, and he says “We have won great glory – we have killed glorious Hektor”. In the act of returning to the fight and killing Hektor Achilles has traded his own life (i.e. he has chosen the short and glorious life) for the fall of Troy.

This is why I feel that Achilles is a true hero. He is wronged massively, by his friends and by cruel fate. He grapples with his own demons of anger and pride. But eventually he corrects this by making the ultimate sacrifice for his people. His triumph over adversity is a story common throughout world literature, and is one to which we can all relate, and one which each of us in our own lives, has emulated in some way or another.