

Three Questions: The Vanities of Homer

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Assignment: Argumentative Essay

I lay down *The Iliad* by Homer with a feeling that is hard to describe. It is something like awe, oddly mingled with disgust. As I stare at the cover of the book, thoughts in my mind begin to disentangle. I see Achilles cling so tightly to his honor by refusing to assist his countrymen, but for what? Hector's wild cries strike terror in the hearts of the enemy, yet what were the accolades of his valor? Slowly, gradually, my feelings of awe disintegrate, and I am left with a torrent of wasted epochs reflecting an era, not of salvation, but of emptiness. As I search for the reasons man wages war, three questions concerning not only the tale of Troy, but also applicable to the lives of all men, arise: What are they fighting for? Is it worth it? And, is victory possible?

Beginning with the first question—What are they fighting for?—it appears that the men in *The Iliad* sacrifice their lives by fighting for tokens of greatness. Because women are one of these tokens, the purpose behind the entire war played out in *The Iliad* is revealed. To explain, many years prior, King Meneleus, an Achaean, was betrayed by his wife Helen and his houseguest Paris, the prince of Troy. After Queen Helen and Paris sailed away in secret to Troy, Meneleus was outraged and summoned all of the kingdoms of Achaea to fight. For nine years, the Achaean armies camped on the foreign beaches of Troy and were unsuccessful in retrieving Helen. Viewing the war from the Trojans' perspective, they defended their city from siege and attack for nearly a decade; but, all of this chaos and bloodshed was caused by one man's foolishness in seducing his host's wife. When assessed from this viewpoint, the motives of both men speak more of pride than love. Meneleus seems to care more about what failure will do to

his own name, rather than his obsolete marriage, and Paris will not give up the prize he has cleverly stolen. This leads to the conclusion that each man is fighting to keep himself from stooping to any form of humility. Therefore, in answering the first question—What are they fighting for?—in essence, it seems they are fighting for their pride and for themselves.

When one begins to delve even further into the lives of these men and asks why they labor so fiercely, the second question comes to mind—Is it worth it? As previously discussed in explaining the purpose of war, men crave social status and possessions. The men in Homer's story know their time is short, and all long for the prize of being entitled an Epic Hero, or one whose deeds and incredible skill make him a legend ("Hero"). However, as explained by Stephen L. Harris and Gloria Platzner, "the hero nevertheless must depend on the community to confer heroic status, signified through rank, rewards, prizes, songs, and stories" (324).

Regardless of one's attainment of this title, the second question warrants further exploration when one considers how short a man's life is on earth. Presenting a seemingly confusing truth, Homer claims that man has practically no afterlife, as he leads a pointless, wandering existence. At first, it may seem heartless to think of Hector's efforts to protect his homeland as "not worth it." But to what end does his bravery and valiance carry him? Nowhere—at least nowhere any soul would long to be, since all men, both good and evil, are doomed to Hades. Harris and Platzner aptly summarize this hopeless situation as follows:

The Greek hero's passion to seize every opportunity for fame and individual achievement springs largely from his certainty that every quality he values—strength, good looks, even divine favor—will inevitably be taken from him. The tension between life's unrealized possibilities and the prospect of imminent

oblivion in Hades' kingdom casts a chilling shadow across the mythic landscape.

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Therefore, in Homer's world, when men die, there is no longer glory, fame, or wealth. There is no more love, family, or patriotism. All men go to the pits of Hades to spend an eternity in darkness. Now, one must admit the existence of foundational and frightening truth—man has no joy in afterlife. Again, the second question haunts these facts—Is it worth it?

Demanding the most conclusive answer of all is the last query—Is victory possible? While pondering this question in the context of Homer's stories, the realm of those who oversee all earthly affairs must be included. The immortal gods and goddesses in classical mythology are somewhat of a paradox to mortal man. When one thinks of a god, he typically pictures an almighty, powerful being who administers justice. The gods in *The Iliad* are given eternal life and divine powers, yet they all possess a human nature. For instance, through a long chain of events, the goddesses Hera and Athena become angry at Prince Paris for accepting Aphrodite's bribe instead of their own. The jealousy and revenge of the goddesses determines the outcome of the war; as such, Troy is doomed, not because of the might and prowess of the Achaeans, but because Zeus, ruler of the gods, has been convinced by Hera and Athena that it should be.

The human nature of the immortals comes with no standard for morality. This renders man completely unable to trust them; he worships out of hope, mingled with fear. In book 24, Achilles adeptly describes the situation of men when he comments, "So the immortals spun our lives that we, we wretched men live on to bear such torments—the gods live free of sorrows" (Homer 605). With this in mind, the last question must be answered—Is victory possible?

The conclusion that victory and defeat are based solely on the whims, feelings, and ever-changing desires of the arbitrary gods leads to a cessation defining the crux of man's existence.

The answers to the three questions create a downward spiral, resulting in a hopeless denouement. In the end, the glory of a mortal's life seems to fade like dying embers or like rust creeping along the base of a great trophy. What are they fighting for? These men are fighting for their pride, because the pride of he who fails or retreats will endure great suffering. Is it worth it? Death is promised to all mortal beings, and, in the despair of Hades, every bit of glory and wealth will be left behind. Is victory possible? Man can never be certain of victory, since the primeval individualism of the gods reigns supreme. To reiterate, man fights for worthless gain, to which no value can be permanently assigned, and the victorious outcome is ever subject to change. What *The Iliad* presents is not truly a story of heroics. When the novel is searched for a deeper meaning, it reveals to us a portrayal of life without hope. In the world of Homer, and mythology, man's very existence is vanity—all is vanity.

Works Cited

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Ms. Servat's Comments: *This paper stood out from the rest from the first paragraph. Ms. Cooper has certainly gone right to the heart of The Iliad and had made clear the connections between Homer's world and our own. While we prefer to think of victory as a manifestation of*

inner growth, we must also recognize that, for the warrior, life may be a futile exercise. The question then becomes—Is anything worth the struggle? I hope the answer is “yes,” but how can any of us truly know?