



The Homeric Code

Close Reading - Iliad Book 1 – Achilles and Agamemnon

Key questions to consider for close reading and textual analysis.

- i. What values are presented in the passage/extract?
- ii. How does Homer use literary devices or narrative structures to shape our understanding?
- iii. What narrative purpose does this character or scene serve within the epic?

“You shameless, self-centred...! How can you expect any of the men to comply with you willingly when you send them on a raid or into battle? It was no quarrel with Trojan warriors that brought me here to fight. They have never done me any harm. They have never lifted oxen or horses of mine, nor ravaged my crops back home in fertile Phthia, nurse of warriors. The roaring seas and many a dark range of mountains lie between us. We joined your expedition, you shameless swine, to please you to get satisfaction from the Trojans, for Menelaus and yourself, dog-face - a fact you utterly ignore. And now comes this threat from you of all people, to rob me of my prize in person, my hard-earned prize which was a tribute from the army. It is not as though I am ever given a prize equal to yours when the Greeks sack some prosperous Trojan town.” (Homer, Iliad, Book 1.150–164, trans. Rieu, 2003)

i. What values are presented in the passage/extract?

- timē (honour - prizes)
- status and recognition within the army
- reciprocity¹
- loyalty and obligation
- avoidance of shame through public reputation

Achilles’ anger may be viewed as excessive or considered extreme, however with the Homeric Code his anger is quite a logically justified response given the serious breach of heroic norms by Agamemnon.

ii. How does Homer use literary devices or narrative structures to shape our understanding?

The main literary techniques in this extract are

- extended direct speech (formal accusation)
- rhetorical argument. (question plus rhetorical argument via unanswered accusations and assertions.)
- moral judgement – via insults – “dog-face” “shameless swine”

Homer permits Achilles to speak without interruption allowing him time and space to construct his case against Agamemnon – he establishes his lack of personal motive for war, articulates injustice and imbalance publicly accusing Agamemnon of leadership failure.

¹ Reciprocity in the context above can be considered as a social obligation. When the exchange functions properly social order can and is maintained. However, when it fails conflict arises. The warrior who fights bravely or endures hardship and risks death will expect timē (honour) in return. This honour is often shown publicly through prizes (geras) given or status bestowed or through praise and often public recognition.



iii. What narrative purpose does this character or scene serve within the epic?

The narrative purpose legitimises Achilles' withdrawal from battle – a break in Homeric values – his withdrawal is justified within the value system and gives the audience understanding of his action.

The withdrawal of Achilles exposes the conflict between individual and collective responsibility. The violation of Achilles' honour vs the suffering that will ensue due to his absence.

Agamemnon as a flawed leader – his failure to respect the code has huge consequences. This scene/moment precipitates the shape of the rest of the poem.

In the Iliad, it could be argued that tragedy comes not from violence but from a breakdown in values that govern heroic society.



Selected Extracts for close reading

Extract 2:

“Hector, you are possessed! This determination of yours will be the death of you. You have no pity on your little boy or your luckless wife, who will soon be your widow, when the Greeks kill you in a massed attack. And when I lose you, I might as well be dead. There will be no comfort left when you have met your end- nothing but grief.

And I have no father or lady mother either. My father Eetion fell to godlike-Achilles when he sacked our welcoming town, Cilician Thebe with its high gates. But though Achilles killed Eetion, he did not think it right to strip the body. He cremated him in his ornate arms and built a grave mound above him; and the mountain Nymphs, daughters of Zeus who drives the storm cloud, planted elms around it.

I had seven brothers too at home. In one day, all of them went down into Hades. Godlike swift-footed Achilles killed them all while they were looking after their shambling cattle and white sheep. As for my mother, who ruled in Thebe under the woods of Mount Placus, Achilles brought her here with the rest of his spoils, but freed her for an immense ransom, and later she died peacefully in her father's house at the hands of Artemis who delights in arrows.

So Hector, you are father and mother and brother to me, as well as my strong husband. Have pity on me now. Stay here on the tower and don't make your boy an orphan and your wife a widow.” (Homer, Iliad, Book 6.407–432, trans. Rieu, 2003)

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