

CLIFFS NOTES on

\$2.25

HOMER'S THE ILIAD



Cliffs[®]
NOTES INC.

YOUR KEY TO THE CLASSICS

THE ILIAD

NOTES

including

- *Introduction and Background*
- *Summaries and Commentaries*
- *Character Sketches*
- *Critical Notes*
- *Selected Questions*
- *Bibliography*

by

*Robert J. Milch
Brooklyn College*



INCORPORATED

LINCOLN, NEBRASKA 68501

Editor

Gary Carey, M.A.
University of Colorado

Consulting Editor

James L. Roberts, Ph.D.
Department of English
University of Nebraska

ISBN 0-8220-0645-6

© Copyright 1966, 1962

by

C. K. Hillegass

All Rights Reserved

Printed in U.S.A

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	5
THE PARTICIPANTS.....	5
THE LIFE OF HOMER.....	6
THE INFLUENCE OF HOMER.....	7
HISTORICAL AND MYTHOLOGICAL BACKGROUND.....	8
HOMER'S POETIC TECHNIQUE.....	11
SUMMARIES AND COMMENTARIES	
BOOK I – The Dispute Between Achilles and Agamemnon	13
II – The Loyalty Test and a Review of the Armies	17
III – The Duel Between Paris and Menelaus.....	19
IV – The Truce Is Broken.....	21
V – The Heroic Exploits of Diomedes.....	22
VI – An Interlude in the Battle.....	23
VII – The Duel Between Hector and Aias.....	25
VIII – The Trojans Reach the Achaean Wall.....	25
IX – The Appeal to Achilles.....	27
X – The Night Mission of Diomedes and Odysseus	29
XI – The Achaeans Defeated Again.....	30
XII – The Trojans Breach the Wall.....	32
XIII – The First Battle for the Ships.....	32
XIV – The Deception of Zeus and a Temporary Reversal of the Trojans.....	32
XV – The Second Battle for the Ships.....	32
XVI – The Exploits and Death of Patroclus.....	34
XVII – The Battle for the Body of Patroclus.....	35
XVIII – The Mourning of Achilles – His New Armor...	35
XIX – Agamemnon and Achilles Are Reconciled.....	37
XX – Achilles Enters the Battle – The Gods Take Sides.....	38
XXI – The Fight at the River – The Combat of the Gods.....	39
XXII – Achilles Kills Hector.....	40
XXIII – The Funeral of Patroclus.....	42

BOOK XXIV – Achilles and Priam Meet – The Body of Hector Is Ransomed	43
MAJOR CHARACTERS	
The Achaeans.....	45
The Trojans and their Allies.....	48
The Gods.....	50
PRINCIPAL GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES.....	52
SUGGESTED READINGS.....	54
REVIEW QUESTIONS	55
A NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS.....	56

INTRODUCTION

Iliad is a Greek word roughly meaning "The Tale of Troy." It is derived from "Ilium," another name for the city of Troy. The book is so named because all that happens in it is very intimately connected with the fate of this great city. There are many human participants and individual adventures involved in *The Iliad*, particularly the central story of the great hero Achilles, but every episode is influenced by the shadow of Troy and its eventual destruction. The reader is, naturally, far more concerned with the human beings than with the relatively unseen presence of a city, nonetheless, in a very real sense *The Iliad* is basically a tale of Troy and of all the events and people involved with it, for all these diverse elements are tied together only by their relationships to the city.

The Iliad is worth reading for many reasons. Not only is it a very great epic poem and a wonderful tale of war and human nature, but it is also the earliest literary work to be produced in ancient Greece (and thus in western Europe) that still survives. Much of what the civilization of the United States is today can be traced to the influence of the ancient Greeks, and it was Homer, more than anyone, who helped to shape the Greek mind and culture. An understanding of his work will help to clarify much that is confusing about our own world.

No summary can substitute for the actual experience of reading *The Iliad*. However, because it is a very long book, and because it is complicated by many factors unfamiliar to the modern reader, this outline will help to make *The Iliad* more understandable and enjoyable for you. The outline contains a complete summary of *The Iliad*, a brief survey of the historical and mythological background, an analysis of the characters and techniques, and suggestions for further study on your own. Read this outline and then read *The Iliad*, for if you neglect the original you will cheat yourself of many moments of pleasure. When you have finished, read the outline again. Perhaps it will help to answer any questions that *The Iliad* has created in your mind.

THE PARTICIPANTS

(A more detailed study of the characters will be found on page 45.)

GREEKS

Achilles
Agamemnon
Aias

TROJANS

Andromache
Aeneas
Antenor

GODS

Aphrodite
Apollo
Ares

Antilochus	Briseis	Artemis
Automedon	Cassandra	Athene
Calchas	Chryseis	Dione
Diomedes	Deiphobus	Hades
Helen	Dolon	Hephaestus
Idomeneus	Glaucus	Hera
Machaon	Hecabe	Hermes
Menelaus	Hector	Iris
Nestor	Helenus	Poseidon
Odysseus	Idaeus	Thetis
Patroclus	Pandarus	Xanthus
Phoenix	Paris	Zeus
Sthenelus	Polydamus	
Talthbius	Priam	
Teucer	Sarpedon	
Thersites		

THE LIFE OF HOMER

There is no question that the writer of *The Iliad* and the *Odyssey* was one of the greatest poets in the history of western Europe, but aside from this, very little can be said about him. Ancient Greek tradition, as well as a study of the language and style of the poems, indicates that the poet probably lived and wrote sometime in the 8th or 9th centuries B.C., but no more definite date can be determined. In ancient times seven different cities claimed the honor of having been his birthplace. None of these assertions can be validated, but more than likely he came from the island of Chios, on the western coast of Asia Minor, for in historical times a family of the same name lived there which claimed him as an ancestor and devoted itself to the recitation of his works. Whether or not he did come from Chios, it is highly probable that he was a native and resident of some section of Asia Minor, for the dialect in which he composed his works is that of the Asian Greeks.

Tradition has visualized Homer as blind; however there is no real evidence for this. This picture is based upon the portrayal of a blind minstrel in *The Odyssey* who sings a poem about the fall of Troy, but there is no reason to believe that the poet was describing himself in this scene. Throughout the two epics there is consistently no autobiographical information, and no other literature of the period which might describe the poet survives.

The early Greeks unhesitatingly insisted that there had been a single individual named Homer to whom they ascribed *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and several minor works called *The Homeric Hymns*. During the Alexandrian period (after the 3rd century B.C.) what is now known as the "Homeric Question" was first propounded. Several of the grammarians of the time asserted that *The Iliad* and *Odyssey*, between which there are significant differences of style and concept, were actually composed by two different writers. This view has at times been supported by later European critics. There has also been a school of thought, especially popular in the 19th century, which claims that Homer never existed, and that the two epics are the collective works of groups of anonymous bards to whom the name Homer was later applied. These scholars suggest that the two poems were constantly revised and added to whenever they were recited and did not reach their present form until the 6th century B.C. when, in Athens, they were written down for the first time.

Contemporary scholarship, in general, believes that each of the two poems has a consistency of style and outlook that shows them to be the work of one writer. This poet may have composed them completely or he may have utilized parts of the work of some earlier bards, altering to fit his own purposes and making them fully his own in the process. Since the people nearest to the composition of the poems believed them to have been the product of one hand, the modern critic has accepted this view and has attributed the differences between *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* to their having been composed in different stages of the poet's life and to the differences in the themes of the works. Rather than take a defensive or apologetic position, the contemporary scholar insists that the burden of proof is on those who deny the existence of Homer. To date, this position has not successfully been challenged.

While little if anything is known of Homer's life, his works are an everlasting tribute to him. Progress is an ideal in most fields of human activity, but in epic poetry it is the two earliest examples which are the best. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* have for thousands of years been the standards by which poets of all languages have measured themselves and, for understanding of human nature in all its aspects, for keen observation of the whole world in which men live, for essential sanity and good taste, and for superb control of all the technical devices of his medium, Homer has never been surpassed.

THE INFLUENCE OF HOMER

The two epic poems of Homer, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, must have been recognized as classics very soon after their composition for they had

a very rapid circulation. By historical times they were known throughout Asia Minor, Greece, and the Greek colonies in the western Mediterranean. The poems were spread by the *rhapsodoi*, professional reciters who traveled through the Greek world, supporting themselves by the presentation of poetry. Such recitations were common, especially at religious festivals and public celebrations. It appears that the poems of Homer were first put into a standard written form by a committee of rhapsodists in Athens, around 535 B.C.

Homer's work was early accepted as the paragon of epic poetry, and his techniques and style were imitated by many later writers. Among the poets who came under his influence was Virgil, a Roman of the 1st century B.C., whose greatest work was *The Aeneid*. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were the common heritage of all Greeks and one of the most important ties binding them together. They soon came to be viewed as sacred, partly because of their great age and beauty and served for the Greeks very much as the Bible did for the Hebrews. The poems of Homer were accepted as the ultimate authority for information about morality, early history and the Olympian theology.

With the passing of the ancient world and the triumph of Christianity *The Iliad* and *Odyssey* lost their sanctity, but they were still recognized and valued as great poetry. In the medieval period they were forgotten in most of western Europe but were preserved in Byzantium where they remained a subject of admiration, imitation, and study. In the 15th century, manuscripts of Homer were brought to Italy from Constantinople. The reintroduction of *The Iliad* and *Odyssey* was an important factor in the newly emerging humanism of the Renaissance, and since that time these two poems have had a lasting and revered place in the world of literature.

A SURVEY OF THE HISTORICAL AND MYTHOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

According to Greek tradition, the Trojan War took place in the 12th century B.C., and the evidence discovered by archaeologists supports this view. Greece, in this period, was a feudal society, very similar to that of the middle ages. Instead of a central political authority, there were many small, independent kingdoms and city-states, tied together by bonds of alliance and friendship. One of their kings was recognized as the most powerful, and as the natural leader in all joint enterprises—in *The Iliad* this is Agamemnon—but he was more like the chairman of a group of equals than an absolute ruler. The upper classes of this society were made up of

chieftains and aristocrats whose main interests were warfare and hunting. These were the only ways in which to gain honor and renown, and, to them, a noble reputation was the most important goal in life. Naturally, there were many people who carried on the ordinary activities of civilization—farming, commerce, and industry—but since the literature of the time was made by and for the aristocrats, these commoners do not play a major role in it.

One of the favorite amusements of the warriors, during times of peace, was the holding of great feasts. While the banqueting was under way, and afterwards until late into the night, they were entertained by minstrels who, accompanied by the music of the lyre, chanted poems about the exploits of earlier heroes, their ancestors or the founders of their states. To do deeds worthy of being sung about by later generations was the ambition of every warrior. The *Iliad*, despite its great length, is an example of these heroic poems, for the feasts often lasted many days and the poem could be sung in sections. As a matter of fact, the Greeks visualized Homer as one of these minstrels, gifted not only with the ability to sing, but with a genius for literary creativity also, and there is no reason to doubt this belief.

The warrior chieftains of Greece loved poems and stories, but the method of story telling at that time was different from our own. Because all the great poems were based upon deeds that had taken place in the past, the general outlines of the events narrated were already known to the audience. Thus, the poet could not use the devices of suspense or surprise endings as we do, but instead concentrated on the interpretation of already known events and on originality and beauty in retelling the old tales. Later on, some of the poetic techniques used to achieve this will be examined. Also, a poet did not have to tell the whole story; he could rely on the knowledge of the listeners and emphasize only certain aspects of the past happenings.

Homer's *Iliad* is a pertinent example of these literary conventions for while the Trojan War lasted ten years, *The Iliad* concerns itself only with the occurrences of a period of 51 days in the last year of the war. The listeners already knew the stories of the abduction of Helen, the siege of Troy, and the wrath of Achilles, so Homer was not obligated to explain everything. To appreciate *The Iliad* fully, one should have the same insight and knowledge as did the original audience. Therefore, a brief outline of the background of the war and the developments before and after the action of *The Iliad* takes place will precede a detailed, book-by-book summary of *The Iliad* itself.

One should note, by the way, that at the time of Homer the word “Greek” was not yet in use. The people now called Greeks were then known as Achaeans, and sometimes also as Argives or Danaans. These names will be used in the summary in order to maintain the proper atmosphere.

According to mythology, the most beautiful woman in all Achaea was Helen, the daughter of the king of Sparta. Each of the chieftains and lords of the Argives wished to marry her and, while courting Helen, they swore a mutual oath of alliance and fidelity to whoever won her hand. Eventually she became the wife of Menelaus.

Shortly afterwards, the three chief goddesses, Hera, Athene, and Aphrodite, disagreed about who of them was the most lovely. They chose Paris, the youngest son of the king of Troy, to be judge, and he named Aphrodite the winner. As a reward she promised him the love of the most beautiful woman in the world.

Following the advice of Aphrodite, Paris visited Sparta, met Helen, and ran off with her to Troy. Menelaus was enraged and Agamemnon, his brother, who was the leading Achaean king, called upon all the Argive chieftains to fulfill their vows and assist in winning back Helen to her rightful husband. After several delays, a vast Achaean army gathered and sailed for Troy, which was located on the western coast of Asia Minor (modern Turkey). Although the Trojans did not approve of Paris' behavior, they felt it their duty to defend him so they and their allies also mobilized a large army. The Achaean troops landed near Troy and, after several minor skirmishes, built a fortified camp and settled down for a long siege. Meanwhile, they supported themselves by raiding nearby towns.

The action of *The Iliad* takes place during the 10th year of the siege. Insulted after a dispute with Agamemnon, Achilles, the greatest of the Argive warriors, withdraws in anger from the combat and sulks in his tent. During his absence the Trojan armies are successful and nearly capture the Achaean ships. Patroclus, the closest and dearest friend of Achilles, is killed by Hector, the Trojan leader. Seeking revenge, Achilles returns to the war and kills Hector. The body of Hector is returned to his bereaved father and *The Iliad* ends with the funeral rites of the Trojan hero.

The war continued thereafter, and Achilles was eventually slain by Paris. Many of the other heroes died and finally making use of the famous trick of the “Trojan Horse” the Achaean forces managed to enter Troy. The city was destroyed and looted, Helen was returned to Menelaus, and the victorious army sailed for home.

HOMER'S POETIC TECHNIQUE

ORAL POETRY

The *Iliad* is a polished epic poem that can easily be classified with the best of any literature, but unlike most later poetry it is the product of a period in which literature was an oral, unwritten medium. The Greeks of the Homeric period, like many other early peoples at a pre-literate level of civilization, possessed a kind of heroic poetry which embodied their legends and history, and which was composed, recited, and handed on orally, usually by a class of professional bards dedicated to this task. The medieval French *Song of Roland* and the *Beowulf* saga of Anglo-Saxon Britain are famous non-Greek examples. It is generally believed that Homer was one of these professional bards and that in origin the *Iliad* was an oral work, though probably of greater length than was common for such poems. Since the *Iliad* was probably composed near the end of Greece's heroic age, there is a possibility that it was first set down in writing, incorporating parts of earlier oral poems. This is uncertain, but even if true, writing in this case would have been used only as an aid to the poet's memory. The style of the *Iliad* maintains all the typical attributes of oral poetry and the poem was obviously meant to be heard, not read.

METER

Greek epic poetry was traditionally composed in a meter known as the dactylic hexameter. Each hexameter verse has six metrical feet; the first five can consist of a dactyl (a long and two short sounds, — ∪ ∪) or a spondee (two long sounds, — —), but the last foot must always be a spondee. The number of syllables in a line of hexameter verse may vary from a minimum of 12 to a maximum of 17, depending on the combination of dactyls and spondees used. It often happened that poets had to add extra words to a line to fill it out to the proper number of stresses and accents. It was necessary in such cases that these words, needed only to fulfill the metrical requirements of the hexameter, should not confuse or change the meaning of the verse, and for this reason the poets devised the epithet, conventional words and stock phrases, which could be added at will at any given point.

EPITHETS

To the modern reader, who finds the *Iliad* in an English translation and is unfamiliar with the technical requirements of the hexameter which

necessitated the use of conventional extra words, the epithet appears only as a sometimes confusing, sometimes meaningful, stock word or short phrase regularly applied to some person or thing. Typical epithets used in the *Iliad* include, "swift-footed Achilles," "bright-eyed Athene," "long-haired Achaeans," and "wine dark sea." Besides their technical function, epithets are a useful stylistic device, helping the audience better to visualize what is being described and aiding the poet in making concise characterizations. In the hands of Homer the traditional epithet was also used to achieve brilliant effects of irony and understatement, for he often contrasted the meaning of a traditional epithet with the real nature of the thing to which it was being applied.

SIMILES

The most prevalent form of imagery used in the *Iliad* is the simile, a poetic comparison of an individual, thing, or event to something else of greater familiarity to the audience. A good example of a Homeric simile is this one in which the reaction of the Trojan army to the return of Hector and Paris from the city in Book VII is described, "...to the expectant Trojans their reappearance was as welcome as a breeze from heaven to sailors numbed in arm and leg by the toil of smiting the sea-water with their blades of polished pine." By making his comparisons with the objects and experiences of everyday life, Homer not only made the heroic content of his poem far more understandable to his audience, but also created some fine effects of contrast and some short lyrical descriptions of great beauty.

FORMAL RHETORIC

More than half the *Iliad* consists of long, formal speeches by the characters. This is because shorter, more realistic dialogue would have been difficult to recite and hard to understand in an oral presentation. In addition, the stateliness of the oratory composed by Homer adds to the essential dignity of the whole poem, and because of this is a good example of the way his style is suited perfectly to the theme and content of his work. Throughout their history the Greeks had a great fondness for public speaking and viewed oratory not only as a practical communications device, but also as a creative art form. To a great extent this was due to the authoritative example set by Homer in the *Iliad*.

REPETITION

Modern readers quickly notice another typical feature of oral poetry — the frequent repetition of epithets, similes, speeches, and episodes. In fact,

slightly more than one third of the lines in the *Iliad* are repetitive and in some books the proportion is much higher. Such repetition is typical of oral poetry for obvious reasons—it reduced the difficulties of composition and made the poem easier to memorize. In addition, repetition helped to refresh the memories of listeners during recitations and enabled them to recognize and anticipate certain developments or types of action. Since poems as long as the *Iliad* were too long to be recited in a single session, such repetition would have been more helpful and less distracting to an ancient audience than to a modern reader.

LANGUAGE

The language in which the Homeric poems are composed is an artificial literary dialect with many archaic elements, comparable in this regard to the language used by the translators of the King James version of the Bible. The language of the *Iliad* is basically a form of the Ionian dialect of Greek spoken in Asia Minor and Attica, but has many Aeolian words and constructions.

GENERAL COMMENT

Although many aspects of Greek epic technique were traditional and did not originate with Homer, he brought a new spirit and skill to their use. It was natural for him to do his work in the style already developed and accepted in his society. In the same manner all writers and poets have worked within the framework prepared for them by their predecessors. But the best of them, like Homer, have surpassed the tools with which they were provided and have molded the conventional forms they inherited into unique and highly personal modes of artistic expression.

SUMMARIES AND COMMENTARIES

BOOK I

THE DISPUTE BETWEEN ACHILLES AND AGAMEMNON

Summary

The *Iliad* opens, as do all epic poems, with the poet's invocation to the muse of poetry. In this invocation he states his theme—the wrath of Achilles and its effects—and requests the aid of the muse so that he may properly

recount the story. The reader is then carried to the point where the trouble originally arose. It is here that the story of *The Iliad* actually begins.

During one of its many raids on the towns located near Troy, the Achaean army had captured two very beautiful maidens, Chryseis and Briseis. These girls were awarded by the troops to Agamemnon, the commander in chief, and Achilles, the greatest warrior, as tokens of appreciation for their valuable services to the army. Chryseis, the hostage of Agamemnon, is the daughter of Chryses, a priest of the god Phoebus Apollo. Her father comes to the Achaean camp hoping to ransom her, but Agamemnon refuses and rudely orders the old man to leave the camp. In despair, Chryses prays to his god for assistance. Apollo answers his supplications and soon a severe plague spreads through the Achaean camp and many die.

On the tenth day of the plague, Achilles calls an assembly of the army, at which he suggests that some soothsayer be called upon to determine the cause of Apollo's anger. This is agreed to, for all the troops know that sicknesses are sent by Phoebus, and that, in some way, they must have aroused his ire. Calchas, an Argive prophet, volunteers to explain the cause of the pestilence, but only if he is guaranteed personal protection. Achilles assents to this.

When the seer reveals that the plague is due to the refusal of Agamemnon to free Chryseis, the commander in chief is furious. He is vain and greedy and insists that he must be repaid by the army if he surrenders the girl. Achilles enters into a bitter argument with him, and the king states that he might release the hostage for the good of the troops, but that if he does so he must receive another girl in her place. Furthermore, he brags, if necessary, he will take the one belonging to Achilles. This suggestion makes Achilles indignant and he is sufficiently angry to consider stabbing the king. He begins to draw his sword but is restrained by the goddess Athene. Finally Nestor, the oldest of the chieftains, rises to speak and has some effect in pacifying the two opponents.

Achilles is sensitive and, upset by the indignities which he feels that Agamemnon has made him undergo in full view of all the Argives, he withdraws his troops from the army. He justifies this by saying that he and his followers had no personal quarrel with the Trojans, but had come only to assist Agamemnon and Menelaus. Now, however, they will not fight and, as soon as possible, will return to their own country. Despite this threat, once Chryseis is safely aboard a ship and heading home, Agamemnon sends his heralds to claim Briseis. Achilles surrenders the girl without any difficulty.

In his sorrow, Achilles wanders along the sea shore alone and weeps. Soon he is joined by his mother Thetis, a sea nymph. He confesses his problems to her and asks that she use her influence with Zeus to ensure that the Trojan armies defeat the Argives in his absence. This, he reasons, will make the Achaeans realize his true value to them and force them to make amends for the insult.

Thetis visits Zeus on Olympus. The king of the gods agrees to aid the Trojans, although he expresses a fear that his wife, Hera will be annoyed since she hates the Trojans and cannot bear to see them win. Sure enough, Hera does dislike the idea of helping Troy, but the threat of Zeus' discipline quiets her protests. The first book ends with a banquet of the gods in Zeus' palace.

Commentary

The *Iliad*, like all epics, begins with an invocation to the muse of poetry in which Homer announces the theme of his poem and asks for divine aid in telling the story. The custom of invoking the muse is due to an ancient belief that the ability to create poetry, which was also thought of as the ability to give a kind of immortality to the people whose stories were told in the poem, was a mysterious and godlike art that could only be practiced with supernatural help.

The first word of the invocation, usually translated as "anger" or "wrath," calls immediate attention to the main theme of the poem—the anger of Achilles and its consequences, both for himself and for all the other participants in the war at Troy. Book I provides an interesting illustration of the fact that the story of the Trojan War and its heroes was already known to Greek audiences before the composition of the *Iliad*. Homer begins his story in the ninth year of the siege without giving any summary of earlier events and all the main characters appear without any formal introduction. This technique, which is known as starting *in medias res* (a Latin phrase meaning "in the middle of things") enabled Homer to capture the attention of his audience right at the outset of his recitation. The presentation of dull background material is deferred to later books where it has added meaning or a more striking effect and the poem begins at the most crucial point in the story of Achilles—the plague sent by Apollo and the council of the Achaean chiefs.

The main action of the *Iliad* originates in the dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon at the beginning of Book I, brought about by the hot-tempered, proud reaction of Achilles when he feels his honor has been insulted by Agamemnon's arrogant and selfish behavior at the assembly, as well as

by what seems to have been a long-standing history of friction between the two chieftains. An important point for understanding Achilles' reaction is that Agamemnon is not an absolute ruler but the foremost among a group of equals (*primes inter pares*) who has taken undue advantage of his position by demanding the maiden given to Achilles.

The quarrel results in the defection of Achilles from the Achaean host at a crucial time in the war, with disastrous results for the Achaeans and, ultimately, for the Trojans and Achilles himself. Because Achilles has indeed been treated unjustly by Agamemnon in Book I, he easily wins the sympathy of the reader, particularly because of the self-control he exercises under the influence of Athene. In time, however, as Achilles sulks alone in his tent and broods on his injuries, he undergoes a psychological transformation and becomes obsessed by the desire for satisfaction and revenge, losing all ability for calm and dispassionate judgment. The story of his gradual moral deterioration, his eventual self-awareness and acceptance of the irrevocable consequences of his acts, and his partial rehabilitation in Book XXIV, make Achilles the first of the great Greek tragic heroes, destroyed by the passionate pride that is the one flaw in his otherwise noble and heroic soul.

At first glance the *Iliad* seems to be an exaltation of war and martial prowess, for the chivalry and emotional appeal of war are never questioned, but the fate of Achilles and the effect of his actions on others, as well as the undercurrent of despair caused by the impending destruction of Troy itself, broaden it into a comprehensive picture of war's tragic futility and waste. The larger-than-life quality of the saga is symbolized by the fact that the plague which is the initial cause of the fatal quarrel is brought about by the intervention of a god.

The Olympian deities, who make their first appearance in Book I, play an important role in the *Iliad*. As one critic has pointed out, the *Iliad* would still be a magnificent and tragic story without the presence of the gods, but it would lack two essential elements—the subjection of men to forces beyond human control and the edifying contrast between the frivolous existence of the gods and the harsh realities of human life. The involvement of the gods in the affairs of men is completely believable even to a modern rationalist, for the divine interventions and inspirations of human characters are the kind of unexpected, mysterious phenomena which often occur in life, and which men are unable to resist or understand. The participation of the gods in the various incidents comprising the *Iliad* gives added dignity and stature to the entire story.