

GUIDE TO THE ILIAD

Caution: The *Iliad* is an epic, which means it is fairly long. Consequently, film versions cannot accurately portray the plot. You are cautioned to stay away from “Troy” and other film versions. “Troy,” for example, makes considerable changes to the plot and completely cuts out several important characters. Because of these changes, watching the film would be a poor substitute for reading the book. If you read the book and watch the film, you would also likely get confused as to what happens in each.

The following is adapted from:

<http://depthome.brooklyn.cuny.edu/classics/dunkle/studyguide/homer.htm>

Genre: Epic

Literary works are divided into various categories called genres in accordance with their characteristic form and content. The *Iliad*¹ belongs to the genre of epic. An epic is a long poem which tells a story involving gods, heroes, and heroic exploits. Since the epic is by its very nature lengthy, it tends to be rather loosely organized. Not every episode is absolutely necessary to the main story and digressions are not uncommon. You will notice the difference compared to the genre of drama, in which every episode tends to be essential to the plot and digressions are inappropriate. The events narrated in epic are drawn from legend rather than invented by the poet and are typically of great significance as in the case of the *Iliad*, which relates an important incident centering around the greatest hero of the Greeks in the Trojan War, the most celebrated war of Greek legend. The epic poet tends to present his narrative impersonally, not drawing attention to himself except occasionally, as in the first line of the *Iliad* when [Homer](#) addresses the goddess who is the [Muse](#)² of epic poetry.

¹The word *Iliad* means "a poem about Ilion [another name for Troy]."

²In Greek myth a Muse is one of the nine daughters of Zeus, who are goddesses of the arts. See line 604 of the first book of the *Iliad*.

Reading the *Iliad*

When you first read the *Iliad*, the beginning of the poem can present some difficulty because it assumes a general familiarity with the war between the Trojans and Greeks that most modern readers, unlike the ancient Greeks, do not possess. You should have no trouble, however, if you keep a few facts in mind. The war had been occasioned by an offense given twenty years earlier to Menelaos, the Greek king of Sparta, by the Trojan Prince, [Paris](#) (also called Alexandros). Paris, aided by the goddess [Aphrodite](#), whom he had judged the winner of a beauty contest over the goddesses [Athene](#) and [Hera](#), had stolen Menelaos's wife, [Helen](#). In order to recover Helen, Menelaos's brother, [Agamemnon](#), the powerful king of [Mykenai](#), had gathered together a large force that included many prominent Greek warriors, themselves either princes or kings. The greatest of these was the hero, [Achilleus](#), the central character of the *Iliad*. The main story of the poem consists of the experiences of Achilleus within a rather limited period of time (fifty-four days) in the tenth year of the war.

Another problem you might encounter in your first reading of the poem is the language in which the story is told. After reading even a small portion of the *Iliad* one quickly becomes aware of Homer's distinctive style, which is characterized by the constant repetition of phrases, whole lines and even whole passages. The name Achilleus is frequently accompanied by the phrase "of the swift feet".³ [Apollo](#) is often

described as he "who strikes from afar." Speeches are repeatedly introduced by phrases such as "Then in answer again spoke..." and summed up by "So he spoke". What is most unusual about the recurring descriptive words applied to the name of a god/goddess,/hero/heroine, or inanimate things is that, although they are sometimes relevant to their context, they most often are irrelevant and therefore seemingly unnecessary.

The reason for the constant repetitions in the *Iliad* is that Homer composed in an oral style, which involved the improvisation of poetry without the aid of writing. In order to facilitate the adaptation of his words to the requirements of the dactylic hexameter, the traditional meter of Greek epic poetry, the oral poet used stock phrases called formulas, which aided him in filling out various metrical portions of the line. A character or object in the *Iliad* generally has a number of epithets of varying metrical size used in conjunction with it. The reason for this is that sometimes a longer epithet is needed to suit the meter, while on other occasions a shorter one is needed. For example, in lines 58, 84, 364, 489 of book 1 a metrically longer epithet is required to describe Achilles; therefore he is referred to as Achilles "of the swift feet". But in lines 7 and 292 of the same book a metrically shorter epithet is needed; therefore he is called "brilliant".

These repetitions are essential to the oral style of composition. They not only aided the poet in composing, but also helped the audience, who did not have the benefit of a text, to remember the details of the story. But if these repeated formulas had been just practical necessities, the *Iliad* would not have succeeded as poetry. In addition to their practical purpose, these formulas with their emphasis on particulars create an indelibly vivid impression of the characters and the Homeric world in general.

Heroic Code

The code which governs the conduct of the Homeric heroes is a simple one. The aim of every hero is to achieve honor, that is, the esteem received from one's peers. Honor is essential to the Homeric heroes, so much so that life would be meaningless without it. Thus, honor is more important than life itself. As you will notice in reading the *Iliad*, when a hero is advised to be careful to avoid a life-threatening situation in battle, his only choice is to ignore this warning. A hero's honor is determined primarily by his courage and physical abilities and to a lesser degree by his social status and possessions. The highest honor can only be won in battle. Here competition was fiercest and the stakes were the greatest.

The heroic ideal in the *Iliad* is sometimes offensive to modern sensibility, but what is required here is not the reader's approval, but understanding of these heroic values. One can only understand the *Iliad* if one realizes what motivates action in the poem. Indeed, Homeric heroism is savage and merciless. Thus the hero often finds himself in a pressure-filled, kill-or-be-killed situation. Success means survival and greater honor; failure means death and elimination from the competition for honor. But victory in battle is not enough in itself; it is ephemeral and can easily be forgotten. Therefore, the victor sought to acquire a permanent symbol of his victory in the form of the armor of the defeated enemy. As you will notice, furious battles break out over the corpse as the victor tries to strip the armor and the associates of the defeated warrior try to prevent it. Occasionally, prizes from the spoils of war are awarded for valor in battle as in the cases of Chryseis and Briseis, who belong respectively to Agamemnon and Achilles. The importance of these captive girls as symbols of honor is evident in the dispute which arises in book 1. The Homeric hero is also fiercely individualistic; he is primarily concerned with his own honor and that of his household,⁶ which is only an extension of himself. As is particularly true of Achilles, the Homeric hero is not likely to be as concerned about his fellow warriors as he is about himself and the members of his household. Loyalty to the community or city had not yet achieved the importance it was going to have in later times.

The following is adapted from http://classics.uc.edu/~johnson/epic/study_guide2.html

Keeping straight the name of places and people:

1. Maintain your own list of names that repeat themselves and seem important.
2. Practice using these by **pronouncing them out loud**: use them in conversations with friends for instance (it's very hard to remember a name you can't pronounce!). You can figure out the pronunciation by using the glossary at the back of your book, if it has one.

Some initial pointers:

1. The following are names that the poet uses to signal "The Greeks" (that is, the Greek army):

- Achaeans = (uh-KAY-uhns)
- Danaans = (duh-NAY-uhns)
- Argives = (ARE-guyvz)
- Hellenes = (HELL-eenz)
- Greeks

2. The poet uses two names for the city of Troy:

- Troy
- Ilium (ILL-ee-uhm)

3. The poet uses two names for Paris (the son of Priam who took away Helen of Sparta, thereby starting the war)

- Paris
- Alexander

4. The "sons of Atreus" (A-tree-us) are Agamemnon and Menelaus; also known as the Atridae (singular Atrides)

- Agamemnon = son of Atreus = Atrides (singular)
- Menelaus = son of Atreus = Atrides (singular)
- Ag. + Men. = sons of Atreus = Atridae (plural)

Similarly, Diomedes is sometimes called Tydides (=son of Tydeus)

And, again similarly, the two Ajaxes are sometimes called Aeantes

Brief Summary of Books of the Iliad

1. Plague. Anger of Achilles.
2. Agamemnon's dream. Trial of the Achaians. Catalogue of ships.
3. Swearing of oaths. "Viewing from the Walls." Combat of Alexander & Menelaus.
4. Breaking of the oaths. Agamemnon reviews his troops.

5. "Aristeia" of Diomedes.
6. Glaukos. Hektor and Andromache.
7. Combat of Hektor and Aias. Burial of the dead. Building the wall.
8. The Trojans advance. Zeus stops the interference of Hera.
9. Embassy to Achilles.
10. Dolon episode.
11. "Aristeia" of Agamemnon. Achilles sends Patroklos to inquire.
12. Battle about the Wall.
13. Fighting at the ships.
14. Beguilement of Zeus. Greeks advance.
15. Retreat to the ships.
16. "Aristeia" of Patroklos.
17. "Aristeia" of Menelaos. Fight over body of Patroklos.
18. Shield of Achilles.
19. Achilles' anger unleashed.
20. Battle of the gods.
21. Achilles fights the River.
22. Death of Hektor.
23. Funeral Games.
24. Ransom of Hektor.

Homer: The Gods (see more about the gods in the character list)

§Trojan supporters

- **Aphrodite** (won the judgement of Paris)
- **Ares** (lover of Aphrodite, rival of Athena)
- **Apollo** (traditional friend of Troy) Artemis (sister of Apollo)
- **Scamander** (river of the Troad, fights Hephaistos)
- **Leto** (mother of Apollo and Artemis)

§Greek supporters

- **Hera** (lost the judgement of Paris)
- **Athena** (lost the judgement of Paris)
- **Poseidon** (traditional friend of Troy, but denied payment by Laomedon after building the walls: but he helps Aeneas in Book 20)
- **Hephaistos** (friend of Thetis)
- **Hermes** (fights Leto)

Character List from <http://www.gradesaver.com/iliad/study-guide/character-list/>

ACHAEANS

including captive women in the Achaean encampment. Homer calls the Greeks "Achaean."
They are also referred to as Argives, Danaans, and Thessalians.

Achilles

Prince of Phthia. Leader of the Myrmidon (MUHR-mih-duhn) contingent. Son of Peleus and Thetis. He is the central character of the Iliad. He is the greatest warrior involved in the Trojan War. On the battlefield, he is unstoppable, able to rout whole armies single-handedly. Dealing with his rage is the central action of the epic; he sacrifices many of his allies to his pride, refusing to fight because of an insult to his honor. His movement from rage to grief and wrath and finally to recognition is the heart of the Iliad.

Patroclus

Son of Menoetius. Beloved companion of Achilles. Patroclus is Achilles henchman, reared in the house of Peleus, Achilles' father. As a child, he killed a man in anger, and in his exile he was taken in by Peleus. Achilles and Patroclus have been inseparable since boyhood. Patroclus is compassionate as well as fierce; when Achilles will not fight, it is Patroclus who attempts to save his comrades from certain death. He is killed by Hector, and his death brings Achilles back to battle.

Agamemnon

King of Mycenae. Son of Atreus. Brother of Menelaus. Commander-in-chief of the Achaean forces. As the high king of the Achaeans, Agamemnon feels the burden of responsibility most strongly. He is at times torn by indecision, and at other times he is a stubborn and monstrously proud man. His insult to Achilles' honor is an outrage, and he is never able to bring himself to give Achilles the true apology that will bring the great warrior back to battle. But his majesty is recognizable, and his attacks of indecision show how seriously he takes his role as ruler.

Odysseus

King of Ithaca. Son of Laertes. Beloved of Athena, Odysseus is the shrewd counselor and skilled diplomat. He is cunning and loyal, supporting and spurring Agamemnon when the commander-in-chief falters.

Great Ajax

Also known as Telamonian Ajax. Son of Telamon. Commander of the contingent from Salamis. A giant of a man, Great Ajax is the embodiment of the good soldier and perhaps the second-greatest of the Achaean warriors. Although he does not drive back whole armies as Achilles, Hector, and Diomedes do, he is a nearly insurmountable bulwark against advancing troops. Halting the enemy advance is his specialty. When he and Little Ajax are grouped together, they are called the Aeantes.

Little Ajax

Also known as Oilean Ajax. Son of Oileus. Commander of the contingent from Locris. Swift of foot, Little Ajax is a great warrior in his own right. He comes quickly when called on by hard-pressed allies. He and Great Ajax work well together as a team. When he and Great Ajax are referred to as a pair, they are called the Aeantes.

Nestor

King of the Nelians. Son of Neleus. Nestor is the oldest of the Achaean kings. He is still courageous and surprisingly strong, but in terms of battle prowess his best days are behind him. He is an important counselor to Agamemnon. He often tells long stories about the exploits of his youth.

Menelaus

King of Lacedaemon. Son of Atreus. Brother of Agamemnon. Husband of Helen. Often in his brother's shadow, Menelaus is still a strong warrior and at times an effective leader. The abduction of his wife Helen is the cause of the Trojan War.

Diomedes

Prince of Argos. Son of Tydeus. Never one to shrink from a fight, Diomedes, arguably the second greatest Achaean warrior, cries out for battle whenever the possibility of withdrawal is mentioned. He is given great strength by Athena in Book 5, and slaughters countless Trojans. He also accompanies Odysseus during the night raids of Book 10.

Phoenix

Son of Amyntor. He is an old mentor of Achilles, beloved by the great warrior. He relates the story of Meleager, hoping to win Achilles over in the embassy of Book 9, but he does not succeed in persuading Achilles to return to battle.

Antilochus

Son of Nestor. In Book 18, Antilochus is the man on whom falls the hard task of telling Achilles that Patroclus has been killed.

Idomenus

Son of Deucalion. Leader of the Cretan contingent. He and Meriones lead a staunch counterattack on the left side of the battlefield in Book 13. Even at Hector's high tide, Idomeneus and Meriones manage to make the Trojans pay a heavy price in lives.

Meriones

Son of Molos. He is Idomeneus' comrade and second-in-command. See Idomeneus, above.

Teucer

Bastard son of Telamon. Half-brother of Great Ajax. Teucer is one of the most skilled of the Achaean archers.

Calchas

Son of Thestor. He is a great prophet. He correctly diagnoses the cause of the plague in Book 1.

Automedon

One of the Myrmidons. He is an esteemed comrade and charioteer of Patroclus and Achilles.

Machaon

Son of Asclepius. Co-commander, with his brother, of the Thessalians who hail from Tricca and Oechalia. Machaon is the greatest of the Achaean healers.

Briseis

Daughter of Briseus. Captive woman in the Achaean camp. Given to Achilles as a prize for valor. When Agamemnon retracts the gift, the insult to Achilles honor is the cause of his rage.

Chryseis

Daughter of Chryses. Captive of Agamemnon. When Agamemnon refuses her father's ransom, Apollo brings plague on the Achaeans.

TROJANS and their Allies

Troy is also referred to as Ilium.

Hector

Prince of Troy. Son of Priam and Hecuba. Husband of Andromache. Greatest of the Trojan warriors, he is the champion of his people. He is a civilized man, more suited to peacetime than to war. When he slays Patroclus, he brings Achilles back into battle. Hector, in turn, is killed by Achilles.

Aeneas

Son of Anchises and Aphrodite. Leader of those Trojans called Dardanians. A great Trojan champion, he is watched over by the gods to ensure that he survives. He is destined to be the ruler of the Trojans who survive the war. In Virgil's Aeneid, he leaves the ashes of Troy to found Rome.

Priam

King of Troy. Son of Laomedon. Father of Hector, Paris, and many other Trojan heroes. An old man with no appetite for war, Priam watches the battles from the ramparts of Troy. He ransoms Hector's body at the end of the epic.

Helen

Daughter of Zeus. Wife of Menelaus. Consort of Paris. Paris' abduction of Helen is the cause of the Trojan War. Nine years later, she is wracked by remorse for the havoc she has caused. At times, she is full of disdain for her new husband Paris.

Paris

Also called Alexander. Prince of Troy. Son of Priam. Husband of Helen. His choice of Aphrodite in the beauty contest of the goddesses wins him Helen. Helen's abduction causes the Trojan War. Paris is a strong fighter, but he has little appetite for battle. His greatest skills remain those of the bedroom.

Andromache

Daughter of Eetion. Wife of Hector. Andromache correctly fears that her husband will die at Achilles' hands. Achilles has already killed her father and all of her brothers. Her speeches are often heart-rending, as she mourns her dead loved ones and worries about the fate of her infant son.

Hecuba

Queen of Troy. Daughter of Dymas. Wife of Priam. Mother of Hector. Hecuba fears for the fate of her husband when he goes to ransom Hector's body. Earlier, she watched from the ramparts with horror as Achilles desecrated the corpse of her most beloved son.

Sarpedon

One of the commanders of the Lycians. Son of Zeus. Sarpedon is one of the greatest men among the Trojan allies. He is killed by Patroclus, and his death reveals an interesting aspect of the Homeric vision of fate.

Glaucos

One of the commanders of the Lycians. Son of Hippolochus. Glaucos is a good friend of Sarpedon, and works hard to avenge his death. In Book 6, he and Diomedes exchange information about their respective heritages, and they realize that their families have a history of friendship. They vow not to harm each other, though they fight on opposite sides in the war.

Polydamas

Son of Panthous. Commander of a Trojan contingent. Polydamas is a great counselor, providing Hector with wise advice that Hector does not always follow. Hector's rejection of Polydamas' counsel late in the epic ultimately leads to Hector's death.

Euphorbus

Son of Panthous and Phrontis. After Apollo has stunned, stripped, and disarmed Patroclus, Euphorbus wounds him. He, in turn, is killed by Menelaus.

Agenor

Son of Antenor. His brave decision to face Achilles, even though he has no chance of winning, buys his people enough time to withdraw behind the city walls. His life is spared thanks to Apollo.

Chryses

Priest of Apollo. Father of Chryseis. Agamemnon's rejection of Chryses' offer to give ransom for his daughter leads to plague among the Achaean troops.

GODS

and Demi-Gods.

Zeus

King of the gods. Son of Cronus and Rhea. Brother and husband of Hera. Father of the Olympian gods and many mortals, including Sarpedon. Zeus is the strongest of the gods, lord of the sky and wielder of the lightning bolt. He is the governor the universe, deciding the destinies of men, but he must sometimes act in accordance with fate.

Hera

Queen of the gods. Daughter of Cronus and Rhea. Sister and wife of Zeus. Jealous, scheming, and powerful, Hera hates the Trojans fiercely and works for their destruction. She cannot overpower Zeus, but she can outwit him.

Athena

Also known as Pallas Athena and Tritogenia. Daughter of Zeus. Goddess of war, wisdom, and crafts. She is a tireless defender of the Achaeans, and she bears strong hatred for Troy. She has a special affection for Odysseus, whose wiliness makes him her favorite among mortals.

Thetis

Daughter of Nereus, the Old Man of the Sea. Wife of Peleus. Mother of Achilles. Zeus and Hephaestus are both indebted to her, and she calls in on the debts on behalf of her son. Through her mortal son, she suffers, and she is able to foresee all of the calamities that will befall him.

Apollo

Son of Zeus and Leto. God of archery and music, Apollo is a great champion of the Trojans. He bears no great love for Achilles, and foils Achilles on several occasions. He also makes possible the brutal and unfair killing of Patroclus.

Artemis

Daughter of Zeus and Leto. Goddess of archery and the hunt, she favors the Trojans but not with the vigor of her brother.

Poseidon

Son of Cronus and Rhea. Brother of Hera, Hades, and Zeus. A powerful god, Poseidon is lord of the sea and earthquakes. Because of a wrong done to him by Laomedon, Priam's father, Poseidon hates the Trojans and sides with the Achaeans throughout the war.

Aphrodite

Daughter of Zeus and Dione. Mother of Aeneas. Goddess of love. Helen and Paris are among her favorites, and Aphrodite fights on the side of Troy. Of little use on the battlefield, in her own realm she reigns supreme. Hera uses a token of her power to overcome Zeus himself.

Hephaestus

Son of Zeus and Hera. Crippled smith of the gods, lord of the forge and fire. In Book 18, he makes Achilles his new magnificent armor and shield. He rescues Achilles from the river god Xanthus in Book 21.

Ares

Son of Zeus and Hera. Bloodthirsty god of war, more frenzied (but also less powerful) than his half-sister Athena. He is a protector of the Trojans.

Leto

Consort of Zeus. Mother of Artemis and Apollo. She sides with Troy because her children do.

Hermes

Son of Zeus. Guide. He escorts Priam safely into the Achaean encampment in Book 24.

Iris

Swift goddess messenger of Zeus.

Dawn

Wife of Tithonus. Goddess of the morning. She is mentioned every time a new day begins in the Iliad.

Sleep

Sleep personified. He helps Hera to put Zeus out of the action, so that Poseidon can help the Achaeans.

Night

Night personified. More a force of the cosmos than a personality, even Zeus is wary of angering her.

Panic, Rout, Rumor, Hate

Homer personifies these forces as deities, although they have no real personalities beyond the forces they represent. Personifying them is mostly a poetic device. These gods are a constant presence on the battlefield.

Xanthus

Also called Scamander. River god. He nearly drowns Achilles in Book 21, but he withdraws when Hephaestus sends fire to combat Xanthus' water.

Chiron

Centaur. Wise and gentle, he is mentioned as a friend to Achilles back home. Myths portray him as an important mentor to the young Achilles, and Achilles' mighty spear is a gift from Chiron.

Boreas, Zephyrus

The North and West wind.