



*Leading a Seminar on Homer's Iliad*

*Jeannette DeCelles-Zwerneman*





Cana Academy® Guide

LEADING A SEMINAR ON  
HOMER'S *ILIAD*

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**PUBLISHED BY**

**CANA ACADEMY®**

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Front cover: Attic black-figure neck amphora attributed to Group E - Workshop of Exekias, depicting two warriors fighting over a corpse - possible the battle of Ajax and Hektor over the body of Patroklos, circa 540 BC, color brightened by Helen DeCelles-Zwerneman, uploaded by user "AishaAbdel" at English Wikipedia on March 20, 2018. Public domain.



*ILIAD*, translated by Richmond Lattimore

Homer

Grade level: 10-12

599 pages

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-47049-8

Recommended hours: 40

## INTRODUCTION

The *Iliad* is a majestic narrative, sweeping in scope and vision. Its characters, imagery and sheer spectacle live on in our imaginations even now millennia since its creation. It addresses some of the most enduring aspirations human beings share: the longing for purpose and meaning, the desire to be remembered and loved, the need for respect and justice, and the yearning for immortality in the face of inevitable death.

While the *Odyssey* is comedy, the *Iliad* is tragedy. As the war continues unabated into its tenth year, the reader witnesses an increasing level of savagery emerge on the battlefield. Repeated references to the domestic life men have abandoned in order to wage this war contrast sharply with the abhorrent nature of the combat, and the reader is frequently reminded of the destruction of one of civilization's most enduring touchstones: the family. Finally, even the kindest men among the warriors—Hektor and Patroklos—succumb to the allure of gratuitous violence in their efforts to reduce and desecrate their victims.

In the midst of this bitter combat, two individuals stand above all others: Achilles and Hektor. Despite their competing allegiances, they come to share some of the same anxieties. Increasingly isolated in his rage, Achilles suffers a growing sense of emptiness as he attempts to avenge his public dishonoring by a man less worthy than himself. That emptiness only mounts with his inability to satisfy the vengeance he seeks for the death of Patroklos, a death for which he is at least partially responsible. The husband, father, son, brother and faithful warrior, Hektor, fights for a cause he does not believe in because he is loyal to his family and his city and because he recognizes that only he stands between them and their ruin.

Men live and fight knowing they will die and that Hades holds no real or substantial life for them. As Patroklos' ghost evaporates with a "thin cry," Achilles observes, "Even in the house of Hades there is left something, a soul and an image, but there is no real heart of life in it" (XXIII, 103-104). Men are brought down by death, regardless of their characters. As Achilles bitterly remarks, "Fate is the same for the man who holds back, the same if he fights hard. We are all held in a single honour, the brave with the weaklings. A man dies still if he has done nothing, as one who has done much" (IX, 318-320). All men will die, and not even the greatest warrior, Achilles, can escape that brute fact. At the story's conclusion, two enemies—Achilles and Priam—are unexpectedly and poignantly bound together in a shared grief over the bodies of two beloved men who died on behalf of their people.

Nevertheless, in spite of all this suffering and death, these warriors are elevated in consequence and stature precisely because they risk everything in daring acts of physical prowess, self-sacrifice, and sometimes unfathomable courage. In doing so, they make themselves heroes worthy of remembrance, a feat the gods can never achieve for themselves.

If taught with enthusiasm, sympathy, and energy, students can enter into this engaging drama and reflect on some of the most important questions human beings face. At the very least, they can experience the awe this story evokes.

This guide is written for teachers who are training readers new to the *Iliad*. It is not a scholarly treatment of the text as such; rather, it is focused on methodically leading teachers and their students into meaningful discussions about the issues at stake in the *Iliad*. Nevertheless, we recommend that teachers consult scholarly commentary to advance and enrich their own understanding of the text. Please see the short bibliography for suggested titles.

This guide includes the following:

- Ten steps to prepare the students to begin their study of the *Iliad*
- A sample crib sheet to help the students keep track of the mortals and gods on both sides of the combat
- Detailed and reflective synopses of the action of each of the twenty-four books
- Discussion questions for each book
- A list of broader questions suitable for closing discussions and essay assignments
- Multiple illustrations
- A short bibliography

Sample:

*Book XXIV Discussion Questions*

The teacher and the students should take considerable time working through this book since it is a vivid and eloquent closing chapter of a long and complicated story. The teacher may want to read sections of this book aloud so that the students can enter into the drama more readily.

1. Read aloud lines 1-21 and recreate what is going on in that scene. Why is Achilles so bent on desecrating Hektor's body? Is there some connection between Patroklos' death, Hektor's death, and Achilles' impending death that is being played out here in this desecration? What is Achilles doing or attempting to do?
2. Apollo says to the assembly of gods: "So Achilles has destroyed pity, and there is not in him any shame; which does much harm to men but profits them also. For a man must some day lose one who was even closer than this; a brother from the same womb, or a son. And yet he weeps for him, and sorrows for him, and then it is over, for the Destinies put in mortal men the heart of endurance" (XXIV, 44-49). What does he mean? How has Achilles "destroyed pity"? This is at least the third time Achilles has been called pitiless. How is he pitiless? What is this "endurance" Apollo speaks of? This expression has been used several times in the text.
3. What is the danger of Priam's plan? Look at Hekabe's advice. Why does Priam decide not to follow her advice?
4. Read aloud lines 476-676 to help the students imagine this extraordinary scene of shared suffering and sorrow as two enemies meet in an unexpected and incredibly humane moment. Be sure to practice this reading in advance.
5. What are Priam's first words to Achilles? What is his physical posture toward Achilles? What does he appeal to in Achilles? How does Achilles react to these words? Compare and contrast Achilles' words to Hektor in Book XXII (260-272) with his demeanor towards Priam in this last encounter.
6. The text says the two men sit and weep. Describe this scene. Are they weeping together or separately? How can you tell? What are they weeping for?
7. Contrast Achilles' response to Priam's supplication with Achilles' earlier encounter with the suppliant, Lykaon, in Book XXI. Why is Achilles receptive to Priam's supplication but not Lykaon's? What makes the difference?
8. Achilles says: "Such is the way the gods spun life for unfortunate mortals, that we live in unhappiness, but the gods themselves have no sorrows. There are two urns that stand on the door-sill of Zeus. They are unlike for the gifts they bestow: an urn of evils, an urn of blessings. If Zeus who delights in thunder mingles these and bestows them on man, he shifts, and moves now in evil, again in good fortune. But when Zeus bestows

from the urn of sorrows, he makes a failure of man, and the evil hunger drives him over the shining earth, and he wanders respected neither of gods nor mortals" (XXIV, 525-533). What does Achilles mean? What do the urns represent? Can a man ever have a life free of evils? Free of blessings? What is the ratio of evil to blessings, according to Achilles? Is there any rational reward system at work in the world, according to Achilles? What is the story of Niobe and how does it relate to Achilles and Priam?

9. Does Achilles get it right? Do his words capture the entirety of the story? Is he missing anything? Collect the textual evidence. What did Thetis say in Book XVIII, lines 72-77?

10. How is Achilles reminded of his father, Peleus? How are Priam's and Achilles' and Peleus' situations similar? What binds them all together? What can Achilles finally see in Priam? What does Priam see in Achilles?

11. Priam asks to see his son's body, and this angers Achilles. Why? What concerns Achilles?

12. Assess Achilles' treatment of Priam. How many days does he give Troy respite from battle? Why?

13. Why must Priam sneak away in the middle of the night?

14. Describe Troy's grief for their loss of Hektor: Andromache's, Priam's, Hekabe's, and Helen's.

15. Discuss the ending of this story with the students. How do they feel? How long is the action of this story? What do they know happens after the story? Recall the opening lines of the poem and the progress of that story.

16. Notice the lovely touch of symmetry: The poem begins with the failed supplication of the father, Chryses, and ends with the successful supplication of the father, Priam. Has anything changed in this narrative? Or, will the story simply pick up where it left off after the funeral rites for Hektor?

17. One beautiful way to end this study is to have the students recite their favorite similes and passages from memory. This is something they could be preparing as they read.

Image of Corinthian helmet, between 700 and 500 BC, at English Wikipedia courtesy of The Walters Art Museum on March 24, 2012. Used under license <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en>.

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