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ENGL 215

An Open Letter to Achilles, an Epic Hero

This semester we have discussed the topic of heroism, what makes a character a hero, and how the historical definition of a hero differs from today’s definition. Based on a traditional view, a hero is someone who is courageous or makes great sacrifices for others. I am writing this letter to Achilles, the epic hero in *The Iliad*. Differing slightly, a modern definition of a hero states, “They put others before themselves. They sprint into danger. They pay dearly for their courage, and they often go years – if ever – without the recognition they deserve” (Murphy, 2014). In many ways, Achilles, you would still be considered a hero by today’s definition, but you are lacking in some areas. In my opinion, what truly makes someone a hero is sacrifice. A hero is someone who sacrifices their wants and needs for the sake of others. The level of sacrifice does not always have to be big and grandiose. Any level of sacrifice qualifies someone as a hero. For the most part, I believe, you are consistent with the values that define a hero in both the traditional and modern sense.

Achilles, you sacrifice the chance to fight in glorious and historic war to preserve your self-respect and honor. Instead of being humiliated and disgraced by Agamemnon, you stand up for yourself. You speak your mind to Agamemnon without fear, and you state the truth about how you are not treated as equals. “No more now- back I go to Phthia. Better that way by far, to journey home in the beaked ships of war. I have no mind to linger here disgraced, brimming your cup and piling up your plunder” (1.198-202). Achilles, you fight with Agamemnon over giving back your war prize, Briseis, whom you love. Though gaining a girl as a war prize is not consistent with characteristics of modern day heroes, you truly love Briseis and are not willing to give up somebody you love to be a war hero. You later state that though Agamemnon is powerful, he is not heroic. “Never once did you arm with the troops and go to battle or risk an ambush… You lack courage” (1. 265-267). You believe a hero is someone who risks it all, not someone who cowers and stays behind in the midst of war. According to your belief and the modern definition of a hero, Agamemnon is not at all heroic. By standing up for what you believe, you sacrifice both fame and honor from war. I believe this makes you a hero by both traditional and modern standards.

Achilles, you have also taught me that heroes are not materialistic. In book 9, Agamemnon tries to win you over with women and lavish war prizes. Any other warrior at the time would have said yes, but you say, “he’s torn honor from my hands, robbed me, lied to me – don’t let him try me now. I know *him* to well – he’ll never win me over!” (9.417-419). Once again, you are not afraid to speak your mind about Agamemnon. Being a hero is not about how many things you have to show off and it’s not always about doing what others think you should do, especially if you don’t feel it is right. In this moment, you were not favored by Agamemnon. Here you question your culture’s definition of a hero, is it really all about how many things you have earned from battle? This has taught me that heroes are not always liked at the time of their existence, but rather over time their actions become more admired. Heroism is not measured by the amount of trophies one has, but rather how one acts.

Throughout *The Iliad* Achilles, you show traces of human emotions despite being an all-powerful demi-god. After telling Agamemnon that you will in fact not be returning to war and will not give up Briseis, Agamemnon proceeds to go behind your back and steals Briseis from you. Reluctantly, you surrender Briseis back to the men Agamemnon sent, but not without letting them see your pain, “Achilles wept, and slipping away from his companions, far apart, sat down on the beach of the heaving gray sea and scanned the ocean” (1.413-415). Your emotions express that you truly love Briseis, and she is more than just a war prize. Instead of continuing the fight with Agamemnon, you sacrifice your love and happiness in order to end a fight. Achilles, you are once again humanized when you mourn the death of your great friend, Patroclus. When told of the fall of Patroclus, “a black cloud of grief came shrouding over Achilles” (18.24). You come to terms with your fate of dying soon in order to avenge your friend’s tragic death. “Then let me die at once since it was not my fate to save my dearest comrade from his death!” (18.113-115). One of the greatest lessons of heroism that you have taught me is to feel all of your emotions and to not be afraid to express them. Often times, people tend to forget that great heroes like you are human and feel emotions, like loss, deeply as well. Not all sacrifices are physical, tangible things. Sometimes sacrifice can happen on an emotional level as well.

All heroes have character flaws because no hero, human or not, is perfect. Your character flaw, Achilles, is anger and the need to get revenge. This is considered a character flaw according to my culture, but according to your culture your act of revenge will make you even more heroic. Once Hector is dead, you deliberately defile his body. Just after Hector died, “brilliant Achilles taunted Hector’s body, dead as he was” (22.429-430). You poked, prodded, and stripped the corpse of all that was his. To top off the torturing of a dead man, you tied the ankles of Hector’s feet to your chariot, dragging him, “so his whole head was dragged down in the dust” (22.475). These actions are not one of a hero. Beating Hector and avenging your friend’s death should have been enough to make you content. If this were to take place in present day, you would be glorified by very few and may even be seen as an antagonist of Hector. In many ways, however, your actions are consistent with what your culture accepts to be heroic actions. My advice to you, Achilles, would be to check your anger and think before you act. A hero is one who makes personal sacrifices, not someone who defiles and desecrates others.

Heroes are strong because they can admit their weakness and wrongdoings. Achilles, you reconcile your wrongs by listening to Priam and giving back Hector’s body. You cry and grieve with Priam, and eventually you see that it is right to give Hector’s body back. Not only do you give Hector back to Priam, but you grant him ample amount of time to bury Hector. You advise him to sleep outside so that troops don’t find him, and you graciously ask him, “how many days do you need to bury Prince Hector? I will hold back myself and keep the Argive armies back that long” (24.772-774). You redeem yourself as a hero by civilly speaking with Priam and granting him the opportunity to properly mourn his son. In this instance, you are putting others above yourself, you are treating them how you want to be treated. Performing a selfless act is a true mark of a hero regardless of being considered traditional or modern.

Reading your story in *The Iliad* I have learned that heroes are not perfect. Heroes will inevitably make mistakes. What makes a person heroic is their ability to admit their mistakes and learn from them. Achilles, you have made some mistakes. You let your anger get the best of you and take control of your actions allowing you to do some things you later regret, like defiling Hector’s body. You are not a traditional hero in the sense that you are not materialistic and you call into question what really makes someone a hero. You proved to Agamemnon that you cannot be won over by random gifts, but instead you forgive those who properly apologize. On the surface, you may appear to be an average warrior, but in reality you provide valuable lessons for people to learn for many years to come.

Works Cited

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