

- (3) or the sparring gods who are the determiners of human destiny?
- (4) or the force that has the power to celebrate virtues such as honour and responsibility, commitment and loyalty to one's group?
- (5) or the force that has the power to destroy those driven by anger, revenge and savagery?

The famous quote by **Longfellow**, “*whom the gods would destroy, they first make them mad*” is applicable to the gods in the *Iliad* where they settle their rivalry by using men to fight, filling them with vengeful and fanatic fury and cruelty.

The poem is about war. War is not new for us in modern times as we witness it happening even today, though with less openness and with more stealth and deviousness than was fought in the days of the *Iliad*. The last century (the 20th century), has seen two world wars and this century continues the war thirst albeit, witnessing more of the cloak and dagger kind where people carry guns under the cloak of fundamentalism, casteism, racism and cause untold misery to innocent people. It is no longer the one-to-one combat between two well matched heroes but is an impersonal war fought by cunning. There is no personal heroism left today as seen in the epic wars of the ancient times. The *Iliad* deals with all the facets of war “ that includes heroic deeds, catastrophic results post “ war when women of the defeated army were taken as slaves and their young sons killed lest they should grow up and rise in revenge “ all of which in the ultimate analysis, lead to the futility and pointlessness of the conflicts, causing destruction of peace all over. Once more returning to **Simon Weil**'s essay on the *Iliad*, the question she flags

Is force inevitably all-controlling and malevolent? Or can it be tamed? Is it possible to learn not to admire force, not to hate the enemy...?

Is the question that continues to trouble us. We shall examine the different facets of war in the next section.

3.2 DIFFERENT FACETS OF WAR

In the last Unit, we learnt how the poem details the war between the Trojans and the Greeks over the abduction of *Helen* by the Trojan prince *Paris*, the fights between *Agamemnon* and *Achilles* over sharing the war booty, between the Trojan *Hector* and the Greek *Patroclus*, and finally between the two incomparable heroes on either side “ *Achilles* and *Hector*. In all these quarrels, the gods and the goddesses take sides. The prelude to the war is the rivalry between three goddesses. *Paris*, the handsome Trojan prince, who is vain about his looks is asked to select the fairest among the three goddesses, *Aphrodite* (goddess of love and beauty), *Athena* (goddess of wisdom and warfare) and *Hera* (goddess of marriage, though she is cunning and manipulative). The initiation of strife, in the form of *Eris* who throws a golden apple to be given to the fairest of the three, introduces an idea that runs throughout the *Iliad*. Strife among the goddesses provokes the war. Strife causes *Achilles* to withdraw from battle. Strife between various groups and individuals sharpens the action of the poem. Finally, the resolution of strife provides an ending for the poem.

The *Iliad* as stated above deals with all the aspects of war

- heroic deeds and winning honours,
- experiencing suffering and pain,
- the clash of egos,

- the tragic losses experienced singly and collectively that include the loss of one's close friend and a father's loss of his son,
- catastrophic results post-war when women of the defeated army were taken as slaves and their young sons killed lest they should grow up and rise in revenge,
- the futility and pointlessness of the conflicts and
- the total loss of a peaceful world.

The poem depicts only the last forty days of the war and bypasses the main cause of the conflict (*Helen's* abduction) between the Trojans and the Greeks. It also leaves out the final outcome of the war "the Trojan rout by the Greeks with the help of the famous wooden horse. The *Iliad* in 24 books focuses on the Greek hero, *Achilles* who was responsible for the death of *Hector*, his Trojan counterpart and the rout of the Trojan army. He had initially withdrawn from the fight in anger against his chief *Agamemnon's* decision to claim *Briseis*, the slave woman, whom he had won as his war prize. The essential conflict at the beginning of the *Iliad* is the clash of two strong egos-that of the leader, *Agamemnon*, who believes in his hierarchal rights as the leader and that of the great warrior, *Achilles*, who feels insulted and humiliated to be denied the rightful claim to his war prize.

The war goes on even as *Achilles* is nursing his ego and grievance. The gory details of the war where the contending soldiers behave like brutal beasts, savagely tearing the entrails of their opponents, show **Homer's** matter-of-fact description and his acceptance of barbarity inherent in war. The fourteenth book of the *Iliad* dealing with *Patroclus's* vicious and barbaric killing of the Trojan warrior *Thetor* and a number of other Trojan fighters seems to endorse war brutality as a routine affair. **Homer** does not pass judgment on the ferocity of war nor looks at the force and violence employed as dehumanised acts of frenzied armies. It seems to imply that if there is war, brutality is to be accepted as a co-concurrent happening. This is not a justification but an acceptance of the inevitable concomitant of war. In a strange way, war brings men together making them violent and willing victims to violence. We may be aghast at reading the graphic details that show the irrational and an even animal like ferocity of men in war, but the Homeric picture continues to unfold before our eyes today when we learn about the beheading of captives by the Islamic State and the decapitation of soldiers on the enemy side along the Line of Control between India and Pakistan. In 1945, about seven decades ago, Hiroshima and Nagasaki witnessed a replay of war tragedy where more than two and a half million people died, a majority of them instantly, others from radiation induced cancer and leukemia, a few years later. Today leaders-political and military- cloak their ambition under the garb of nationalism and patriotism, not realising that hatred begets hatred and the brunt of war is borne by soldiers who lay down their lives. In the essay, '*On the Pleasure of Hating*', the 19th Century English essayist **William Hazlitt** describes the effects of hatred:

It makes patriotism an excuse for carrying fire, pestilence, and famine into other lands; it leaves to virtue nothing but the spirit of censoriousness.

Bernard Knox sums up **Homer's** realism this way:

*Three thousand years have not changed the human condition in this respect. We are still lovers and victims of the will to violence, and so long as we are, **Homer** will be read as its truest interpreter.*

Let us analyse the notion of honour and the concept of horror in the *Iliad* next.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) It will be an interesting activity to analyse some of the current TV serials that magnify the greatness of war through a graphic and violent presentation of war scenes.

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- 2) What are the different facets of War?

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3.3 HONOUR *VERSUS* HORROR, THE *ILIAD* AND THE SEQUELS TO THE *ILIAD*

War unites people; it is the force that absorbs and destroys men and women in its manifest violence. **Homer** does not praise war nor does he condemn it. He looks at war as a recurrent evil that cannot be wished away as it elevates the victor and eliminates the vanquished. Who the victor will be and who the vanquished cannot be decided except through war. **Homer** is stubbornly silent on the issue of the worth of war though the poem raises the question of honour *versus* horror in the battlefield. Homeric culture lays great emphasis on personal honour where the preservation of that honour is possible only through fighting, irrespective of whether one wins or loses. The warrior gains heroic nobility not only in victory but also in death. *Hector* is a good example of a hero whose great feats on the battlefield reflect a measure of his loyalty to his king and his people because he fights despite personally disapproving *Paris*’ elopement with *Helen* that triggers the war. He shows character by his willingness to enter the battlefield though he recognises the possibility of defeat and the subsequent suffering that would befall his wife and his son. The *Iliad* has a tender scene early in book six when *Hector*’s wife *Andromache* and his son *Astynax* plead with him not to be on the vanguard and plunge headlong into war.

But *Hector* will not be deterred; he decides to fight; he prays and wishes that one day his son will be the prince of the Trojans, their best fighter, better even than his father, “*a joy to his mother’s heart*”. *Hector*’s prayers were in vain as *Astynax* is thrown off a cliff and killed by the Greeks.

The later three Greek plays, *Agamemnon* by **Aeschylus** and *The Trojan Women* and *Hecuba* by **Euripides** present the aftermath of the Greek victory when women of Troy were shipped to Greece as slaves and *Astynax* brutally killed despite the heart rending pleas of *Hecuba*, his grand- mother, the widow of *Priam*. *Hecuba* in **Euripides**’ play of the same title after being captured cries:

Woe, woe is me! What words can I utter? What sorrow, what lamentation, the wretchedness of wretched old age, and slavery that I cannot bear or endure!

Woe is me! Who will defend me? What family, and what city? Aged Priam is gone; gone are my children. Which way am I to go, this or that? Where can I be safe? Where is any god or power divine to help me?
Hecuba 154-165

This is the outcome of the defeat of the Trojans, movingly portrayed by **Euripides** in *The Trojan Women* and *Hecuba*. *Andromache* becomes a slave along with *Hector's* mother after she is subjected to the horror of seeing *Astynax* thrown down from the ramparts of Troy. We see a parallel in *The Massacre of the Innocents*, the biblical account of infanticide, depicting the execution of all young male Jewish children by **Herod** the Great, the Roman-appointed King of the Jews for fear of one of them dethroning him and becoming the King of the Jews. We have a similar parallel in the Indian mythological story of *Kansa*, the tyrant ruler of *Mathura*, who goes on a killing spree of his sister's sons one after the other (except *Krishna* who escapes) on learning that he will be killed by the eighth son of his sister. Such inhuman cruelty continues today albeit with change of characters and change of arms and weapons. The *Iliad* presents both the euphoric and tragic results of war and has a lesson for us in the 21st Century to refrain from acts of brutality and inhumanity, cloaked under the guise of patriotism or nationalism or religious fundamentalism.

Achilles refuses to oblige the repeated requests of *Agamemnon*, *Menelaus* and *Odysseus* to enter the fray, not only on account of hurt ego and anger, but also because he sees the pointlessness of the conflict involving the two armies especially when the Trojans have neither hurt him personally nor damaged his crops nor stolen his cattle and horses. In a subtle way, **Homer** shows how war disturbs the peacetime occupation of men and women who live far removed from the battle scene. The war is fought for restoring *Helen* to *Menelaus* and for punishing the Trojans for the indiscreet act of their Prince *Paris* but it is a heavy price to pay for all those who are not a part of the war. Man's brutality, shaped by his own arrogance and tyrannical ambition, has been the subject of many of the classical masterpieces from myths to epics. More than five thousand years later it continues as witnessed in the massacre of a million soldiers during World War I and later during World War II.

After much persuasion, *Achilles* finally relents and sends his best comrade, *Patroclus* to fight the ace Trojan warrior, *Hector*. *Hector's* killing of *Patroclus* is the last straw for the reluctant *Achilles* who now needs to enter the battlefield. He is beside himself with grief and in a frenzied rage, kills *Hector* in a single combat and attaches the corpse to his chariot, dragging it triumphantly around the walls of the city. Compare this with what happened in 2010, as recorded by **Charlotte Higgins** about US troops in Iraq in 2004, when a repeat of *Achilles'* brutality occurred with the bodies of Americans attached to the backs of cars and dragged through the streets of Fallujah. What happened in the *Iliad* was well within the societal norms of the day when war showed both heroism and animalism. But such a happening in the 21st century when Man supposedly has moved far away into a more liberal, civilised and highly developed and rational society, shows that humanity is still a long way off from evolving into a more humane, enlightened and tolerant society.

Having said that, let's go back to our story. We realise that post war or during the war, heroes are bound to be martyred and in the *Trojan War*, *Priam* begs *Achilles* for *Hector's* body. This aspect of the *Trojan War* in the *Iliad* will be examined next.

Check Your Progress 2

1. How does War bring about honour as well as horror?

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3.4 RECONCILIATION

At the end of the poem *Hector's* frail and elderly father, *Priam*, enters the Greek camp and persuades *Achilles* to restore to him his son's body. In an article "On the Iliadic War", *Maronitis* writes:

Yet the Iliad still has much to say about war, even as it is fought today. It tells us that war is both the bringer of renown to its young fighters and the destroyer of their lives. It tells us about post-conflict destruction and chaos; about war as the great reverser of fortunes. It tells us about the age-old dilemmas of fighters compelled to serve under incompetent superiors. It tells us about war as an attempt to protect and preserve a treasured way of life. It tells us, too, about the profound gulf between civilian existence and life on the front line; about atrocities and indiscriminate slaughter; about war's peculiar mercilessness to women and children; about friendships and sympathies across the battle lines. It tells us of the love between soldiers who fight together. Most of all, it tells us about the frightful losses of war: of a soldier losing his closest companion, of a - father losing his son.

The *Iliad* was written in the mid " 8th Century B.C about the Trojan War that belonged to the Aegean Bronze Age around 3200 B.C. If one looks at World Literature, it will be seen that the *Mahabharata* War ended nearly a hundred years earlier in 3102 B.C. Today after 5000+ years, the repetition of bloody conflicts resulting in huge loss of men and women, civilians and soldiers underscores the truth that Man has not mentally evolved sufficiently to curb his basic animal instinct fuelled by ego, arrogance, revenge, greed and inhuman animosity for others whose racial, spatial and religious identity is different.

The *Iliadic* war first shows warriors on either side becoming indistinguishable as they are by turns victors and victims of frenzied fighting. The poignancy hits us when we realise that a life lost is a finality. A life lost is a life lost; it cannot be got back; no amount of tears can wash away the sadness of the tragedy. A Greek or a Trojan, or in today's context, an Indian or a Pakistani, a Christian or a Muslim or a Hindu, they become alike and indistinguishable in death as their blood mingles and flows in streams. A life lost is one human being lost and cannot be re-got.

After the warriors' fight unto the last, the poem describes the one to one fight-the single combat-between individual heroes and at the final tally it is discovered that the number of Achaeans dead were the same as the number of Trojans. It is impossible to distinguish the two sides. It is unthinkable that they should be divided into victors and vanquished. This is best exemplified by the two important killings towards the close- the killing of *Patroclus* by *Hector* and the slaying of *Hector* by *Achilles*. **Homer** describes *Achilles* when he learns about *Patroclus'* death in book 18,

*A black cloud of grief came shrouding over Achilles
Both hands clawing the ground for soot and filth,
he poured it over his head, fouled his handsome face
and black ashes settled on to his fresh clean war-shirt,
Overpowered in all his power, sprawled in the dust,
Achilles lay there, fallen . . .
tearing his hair, defiling it with his own hands . . .”*

Achilles's grief is turned into wrath and he decides to enter the battlefield to avenge his dear friend's death. He yokes his emotion to action and rages into battle like a flash of lightning, killing a dozen Trojans in one go. When a young Trojan, Lycaon pleads with him to spare his life, Achilles speaks in a matter-of-fact tone:

*“Come, friend, you too must die. Why moan about it so?
Even Patroclus died, a far, far better man than you.
And look, you see how handsome and powerful I am?
The son of a great man, the mother who gave me life
a deathless goddess. But even for me, I tell you,
death and the strong force of fate are waiting.
There will come a dawn or a sunset or high noon
when a man will take my life in battle too –
flinging a spear perhaps
or whipping a deadly arrow off his bow.*

These lines are a summation of the ultimate truth which shows that man's equation with fate is like that of 'a fly unto wanton boys who kill for them for their sport'. Inherent in these words is the truth that the mightiest warrior like him has also to bow down before Fate or God. The gods who intervene and direct the fortunes of men are shown as immortal men while men rising to their full might and potential like *Achilles* and *Hector* are mortal gods. Again to quote **Charlotte Higgins**,

The poem's gods, who urge on the fighters and intervene to help their favored heroes, are flimsy and flippant compared to their mortal counterparts ... The life-and-death struggles of the human characters seem weightier and more agonizingly present when set against the meaningless existence of the gods. This is a hard world: the war isn't "for" anything, certainly not some greater good, but is merely part of the blind workings of an inexplicable fate that even Zeus, king of the gods, must bow to. When the warriors die, there are no flights of angels to sing them to their rest, only the prospect of a ghastly, ghostly, absence of meaning.

Hector is killed. It is the turn of the Trojans and in particular the aged father, *Priam* to feel the heart ache that *Achilles* had felt over the loss of *Patroclus*. Book 24 is unique as it deals with happenings off the battle field. While *Achilles* is shown as a relentless and merciless warrior on the battle field, rejecting the opponents' supplication to be spared, *Priam's* supplication to *Achilles* to restore his son's body exemplifies the values of humanity and fellow feeling. **Donald Lateiner** in his 'Probe and survey Non verbal Behaviours in *Iliad* 24' writes: "*Priam's self degradation, his postural abasement before Achilles, is the necessary price for the recovery of his son's body, the supremely valuable 'social artifact'*". *Priam's* humble supplication, his gesture of taking and kissing his son's slayer's hands is an example of a new kind of heroism- an exhibition of egoless humility in defeat. This is heroism off the battle field- a recognition

of the might and power of his opponent and a willing shedding of his ego in the larger context of honouring his son who had met with a heroic end. It is Priam, the King, who kneels before Achilles, a warrior. Achilles sees the image of his own father in Priam. The two feel and experience a sense of common grief over human loss and in that shared pain, they come together. Achilles takes Priam's arm and honours him by inviting him to share a meal with him. Priam and Achilles recognise their essential identity with each other- and with all other men. It is two equal killings- that of Patroclus by Hector and that of Hector by Achilles that brings the war to an end. The two men- the old King and the young warrior who were sworn enemies become friends, "when they become aware of their common loss as a result of the Iliadic war." The Iliad ends with the return of Hector's body to Troy and that signals the reconciliatory end of the Iliadic war. "In the beginning there was no beginning/ And in the end no end," (Christopher Logue) encapsulates the Homeric essence of war's ultimate balance between the contending foes.

Check Your Progress 3

1) How does the Iliad end?

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3.5 LET US SUM UP

The Unit has discussed War in the Homeric Age and in our present age.

- It delineates the different facets of war.
- The two sides of War in the context of honour and horror are discussed.
- We have taken a brief look into the sequels of the Iliad that show the horrors of war.
- The final reconciliation between Hector's father and Achilles is an example of heroism off the battlefield.

3.6 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

2. Refer to section 3.2

Check Your Progress 2

1. Refer to section 3.3

Check Your Progress 3

1. Refer to section 3.4

3.7 GLOSSARY

<i>Antithetical</i>	: sharply contrasted in character or purpose
<i>Surreptitiousness</i>	: being covert and deceptive
<i>Subterfuge</i>	: falsehood, pretext
<i>Cloak and dagger</i>	: refers to situations involving intrigue, secrecy, espionage, or mystery. The phrase has two possible origins.
<i>Euphoric</i>	: a great feeling of elation