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Who is the Main Hero of *The Iliad*?

The modern notion of heroism and the characteristics of what makes one a hero stem primarily from ancient Greek sources, be it philosophical or literary. Among these sources is undeniably *The Iliad*, broadly viewed as one of the most influential works of literature in human history. To determine which character could be seen as the main heroic ideal in the poem, one should consider whether to rely on the modern ethical principles or those of ancient Greece. Although the former might appear easier and more relevant, the latter can provide a genuine understanding of the source material in its historical context, and that approach would point to the figure of Achilles.

The fundamental concept that defines a Greek hero is that of *kleos*, or glory. The hero, while having been born a mortal man or woman, strives to achieve god-like status through their deeds, even if the way that the events unfold spells doom for them (Nagy 23). A heroic death is not feared but rather welcomed, for it provides the hero with a promise of eternal glory, of being admired and worshipped, or transcending their mortality (Horn 6). In this framework, such a fate is presented as the culmination of human potential, and it is precisely what happens to Achilles, who single-handedly tips the scales of the Trojan war. This achievement earns the hero immortalization and renown, placing him at the center of *The Iliad* as recognition of the honor he earned in death.

The story of *The Iliad* unfolds with the transformation of Achilles' anger. In the beginning, it is passive, turned to his people, then it becomes destructive and fueled by pain, and is later subdued by the recognition of shared humanity through loss (Evzonas 9). The

narrative progression is closely tied to these varied expressions of wrath and Achilles' subsequent mastery over it, this feeling transforming both the larger events of the story and the hero himself. Overcoming anger is the culmination of his struggle, that which ultimately leads to his demise and the conclusion of the overarching story (Nagy 13). Thus, Achilles' role as the driving force behind the events that transpire and the transformative nature of his wrath contribute to the idea of him being the main hero of *The Iliad*.

There are certainly episodes that, by modern ethical standards, paint Achilles in a less than heroic light. He considers a personal insult reason enough not to help his people, who depend on his martial prowess, and allows himself to be consumed by anger to the point of cruelty and inhumanity (Finkelberg 260). Yet, one does not always have to boast angelic compassion or perfect composure to be a hero, especially an ancient Greek hero. Achilles is defined both by his immense power as the mightiest of warriors and his ability to transcend his mortality and achieve greatness (Nagy 23). These qualities are precisely what was valued most in a culture that worshipped its many gods and heroes and frequently engaged in warfare.

To conclude, if one bases one's inquiry into the main figure of *The Iliad* on the qualities that define a hero in the context of ancient Greece, Achilles would be the logical answer. Not only does his characterization align perfectly with the fundamental aspects of heroism, but it is also central to the narrative. *The Iliad* is an epic poem meant to immortalize a hero through recounting his great deeds and his glorious death, and that is what it does in regard to Achilles.

Works Cited

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