

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

- *The Iliad*, Books 23-24
 - Overview of *The Iliad*, Books 23-24
 - Analysis of Book 24: The Death-Journey of Priam
- Grammar 4: Review of Parts of Speech:
 - Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives, Adverbs,
 - Pronouns, Prepositions and Conjunctions

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 23

- Achilles holds funeral games in honor of Patroclus
- these games serve to reunite the Greeks and restore their sense of camaraderie
- but the Greeks and Trojans are still at odds
- Achilles still refuses to return Hector's corpse to his family

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 24

- Achilles' anger is as yet unresolved
- the gods decide he must return Hector's body
- Zeus sends Thetis to tell him to inform him of their decision
- she finds Achilles sulking in his tent and he agrees to accept ransom for Hector's body

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 24

- the gods also send a messenger to Priam and tell him to take many expensive goods to Achilles as a ransom for Hector's body
- he sneaks into the Greek camp and meets with Achilles
- Achilles accepts Priam's offer of ransom and gives him Hector's body

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

Overview of *The Iliad*, Book 24

- Achilles and Priam arrange an eleven-day moratorium on fighting to allow the Trojans to bury Hector with honor
- Priam returns with Hector's body to Troy
- the Trojans assemble and hold funeral rites for Hector
- *The Iliad* ends with the lamentation of the Andromache, Hecuba and Helen

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

Analysis of *The Iliad*, Book 24

Priam's **Death-Journey** (*Nekuia*)

- Priam's trip to Achilles' tent is a passage particularly rich in death imagery
- Homer casts it as if Priam were dead and his soul were going to the Underworld
- this is called a “death-journey”
- cf. Odysseus' *nekuia* (“summoning of dead souls”) in *The Odyssey*

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

Analysis of *The Iliad*, Book 24

Priam's **Death-Journey** (*Nekuia*)

- as he prepares to go, Priam first loads up a wagon full of riches
- Hecuba tries to stop him but he insists on going and wishes for death:

“ . . . before I see my city
taken and ravaged, let me go down blind
to Death's cold kingdom!”

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

Analysis of *The Iliad*, Book 24

Priam's **Death-Journey** (*Nekuia*)

- note that Homer enumerates the many expensive gifts which Priam is taking to Achilles
- it shows the worth and importance of both Achilles and Hector

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

Analysis of *The Iliad*, Book 24

Priam's **Death-Journey** (*Nekuia*)

- as Priam heads off out of town:
 - Family and friends all followed weeping
as though for Priam's last and deathward ride.
- in antiquity, bodies were carried in wagons
outside of a city to be buried
- Homer speaks as if Priam *is* a corpse

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

Analysis of *The Iliad*, Book 24

Priam's **Death-Journey** (*Nekuia*)

- Zeus sends Hermes to escort Priam into the Greek camp
- Hermes is the psychopompos (“guider of souls,” i.e. to Hades)
- Zeus tells Hermes to make Priam “invisible,” like a dead man’s soul

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

Analysis of *The Iliad*, Book 24

Priam's **Death-Journey** (*Nekuia*)

- Hermes puts on his magical sandals and picks up his wand, “with which he charms sleep”
- Sleep is the brother of Death (Book 16)
- cf. Utanapishti's challenge to Gilgamesh **not** to fall asleep

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

Analysis of *The Iliad*, Book 24

Priam's **Death-Journey** (*Nekuia*)

- Priam drives past a tomb, “the mound of Ilos”
- night and darkness come over Priam
- he sees Hermes and trembles with fear, but Hermes pretends to be a friendly Myrmidon and offers to serve as his guide

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

Analysis of *The Iliad*, Book 24

Priam's **Death-Journey** (*Nekuia*)

- when they talk about Hector, Priam begins to lose touch with reality:

ah, did my son exist? was he a dream?

- that is, when Priam thinks about Hector, he wonders if he was sleeping
- in fact, he is acting like a ghost

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

Analysis of *The Iliad*, Book 24

Priam's **Death-Journey** (*Nekuia*)

- they cross the moat leading into the Greek camp
 - cf. the river Styx
 - also, the “waters of death” in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*
- Hermes puts all the Greek guards to sleep

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

Analysis of *The Iliad*, Book 24

Priam's **Death-Journey** (*Nekuia*)

- Priam goes to Achilles' tent which Homer describes as if it were a huge palace
- cf. Hades' palace complex in the Underworld

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

Analysis of *The Iliad*, Book 24

Priam's **Death-Journey** (*Nekuia*)

- Hermes opens the gates into Achilles' tent
- he at last reveals to Priam who he is, the god Hermes
- Hermes advises him about what to say to Achilles

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

Analysis of *The Iliad*, Book 24

Priam's **Death-Journey** (*Nekuia*)

- Priam finds Achilles sitting in his chair at the head of a table after a great feast
- Priam goes directly to Achilles, kneels before him and kisses his hands
- Priam's sudden appearance shocks Achilles and his companions

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

Analysis of *The Iliad*, Book 24

Priam's **Death-Journey** (*Nekuia*)

- note the simile Homer inserts here:

When, taken with mad Folly in his own land,
a man does murder and in exile finds
refuge in some rich house, then all who see him
stand in awe. So these men stood.
- but Achilles is the murderer, not Priam!

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

Analysis of *The Iliad*, Book 24

Priam's **Death-Journey** (*Nekuia*)

- Priam speaks to Achilles:

Remember your own father.

Think me more pitiful by far, since I
have brought myself to do what no man else
has done before -- to lift to my lips the hand
of one who killed my son.

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

Analysis of *The Iliad*, Book 24

Priam's **Death-Journey** (*Nekuia*)

- Priam and Achilles weep together:
 - the old king huddled at Akhilleus' feet,
wept, and wept for Hektor, killer of men,
while great Akhilleus wept for his own father
as for Patroklos once again; and sobbing
filled the room
- Achilles' rage is finally melting into grief

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

Analysis of *The Iliad*, Book 24

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- note the epithet of Hector here:
 - the old king huddled at Akhilleus' feet,
wept, and wept for Hektor, **killer of men**, . . .
- Homer reminds us that Hector whom Achilles brutally murdered was also a famous “murderer of men”

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

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- in calling Hector a “killer,” the poet encourages us to see both sides
- he does not allow us to construct an easy or one-dimensional moral from the story
- he seems to be saying that, however good the reason for war, it ends up creating universal sorrow

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

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- Achilles takes the ransom from Priam's wagon and puts Hector's body on it
- then Priam and Achilles dine together
- cf. the feast of the dead
 - Persephone in the Underworld
 - Gilgamesh and the loaves of bread

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

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Priam's **Death-Journey** (*Nekuia*)

- Achilles reminds Priam about **Niobe**:

We are told

that even Niobe in her extremity

took thought for bread -- though all her brood had
perished, . . .

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

Analysis of *The Iliad*, Book 24

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- but in the end, Achilles notes that the gods eventually turned Niobe into stone because she surrendered to her grief
- that seems to contradict the lesson he's trying to deliver, that in spite of his grief, Priam should eat
- why does Homer have Achilles say this?

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

Analysis of *The Iliad*, Book 24

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- is this allusion supposed to console Priam and encourage him to eat?
- or is Achilles trying to trick him into eating, as Hades did Persephone?
- perhaps, it's like Homeric similes, more of an oxymoron than a clear or direct parallel

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

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- after Achilles and Priam feast together, Priam lies down to sleep
 - cf. Gilgamesh in Utanapishti's realm
- but Hermes rouses him and secures his safe passage back to Troy
- the Trojans mourn Hector

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

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- why does Homer end *The Iliad* this way?
- Hector's funeral gives a sense of closure to a work which does not by definition include the end of the full story
- Hector's funeral foreshadows Troy's fall, as well as the death of Priam and the end of his family line

Homer and Greek Epic

INTRODUCTION TO HOMERIC EPIC (CHAPTER 4.IV)

Grammar 4: Review of Parts of Speech