GUEST EDITORIAL

Death And Grieving in Homer's Iliad as Illustrated by Dr. Emily Wilson

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ABSTRACT

Emily Wilson's translation of the final eight books of Homer's Iliad offers a powerful look at how people cope with death and grief. The epic poem, traditionally attributed to Homer, delves into the enduring impact of loss, especially on its central figure, Achilles. The Iliad vibrantly portrays the fatalities of war and the dreadful effects of grief. It was seen gaudily in Achilles's descent into rage after the death of his friend, Patroclus. Though Achilles's grief deviates from modern theories, it showcases stages of grief like denial, depression and anger. Additionally, the Iliad offers valuable insight of historical suffering. Ancient Greek concepts like 'divine madness' or 'theia mania,' providing a historical lens on people's understanding of the pain of loss during that era.

Keywords: death, dying, grief, grieving

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INTRODUCTION

One of the world's most beloved pieces of epic poetry, Homer's *Iliad*, remains a shining example of grief and death, even over two thousand years of its first writing. In the poem, death is a constant and brutal reality, with grief serving as a powerful motivator and a defining characteristic of the characters, especially Achilles, whom the story follows during the Trojan War. Stories of war almost always talk about death, but very few explore the grief in such detail and with such visceral detail as the *Iliad*, both Homer in his original ancient Greek, and numerous translators who have followed. For the purposes of this analysis, Dr. Emily Wilson's translation, published in 2023, was used, and it was assumed that Homer's original syntax and meaning was kept in her translation. This translated book was also used for this paper due to its focus on death and grief as well as the simple language, easier to understand.

Homer was an ancient Greek poet alleged to have written *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Though he was credited with writing these historically famous works, little else is known about him (Kirk, 2025). Despite this, he was one of the most renowned authors in the classical world, and his influence remains prevalent even in the modern age of writing. However, there is an argument amongst classicists that Homer was not one person, but a series of poets, stating that "it is possible that the blindness of Homer was a myth invented to account for the fact that the Homeric poems originally evolved orally, before the development of writing in Greece, by being performed and passed down from bard to bard" (Dunn, 2020). Although information about the author was very rare, it is known that there were no scholars of death in the times of Homer's existence.

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There are numerous characters in The Iliad; however, the most famous are the hero Achilles, son of Peleus and the goddess Thetis. After all, he is what the story is about, giving readers the ever- famous lines, "Goddess, sing of the cataclysmic wrath of great Achilles, son of Peleus which caused the Greeks endless pain and sent so many noble souls of heroes to Hades" (Wilson, 2023, p.1). The poem follows Achilles throughout the Trojan War: a conflict between Greece and Troy that began after prince Paris of Troy steals away Helen, the wife and queen of Menelaus, the king of Sparta. There are twenty-four books that make up the entirety of the epic, but they can be divided into five parts: exposition (books 1-4), duels between Greek and Trojan heroes (books 5-7), the rout of the Greeks (books 8-15), the death of Patroclus (books 16-18), and the rage of Achilles (books 17-24). The focus of this essay will be the last two sections; the last 8 books of the poem–as those best highlight death, grief, and mourning.

Patroclus was the close friend and suspected lover of Achilles, and it is his death that caused the epic story of the Iliad as a whole. He, unable to bear witness to the fighting any longer, went to Achilles, who had refused to fight in the war for nine years due to a disagreement between him and the king Agamemnon of Mycenae, Greece. Weeping, Patroclus scolds Achilles for his stubbornness, and begs that he was allowed to lead the Myrmidons; the warriors of Achilles in his stead, borrowing his armor to do so. Achilles agrees, upon sternly urging Patroclus to return to him once the Trojans had been pushed back, that they would defeat Troy together. This, however, does not happen, as Patroclus is killed in battle by Prince Hector of Troy.

Upon hearing news of Patroclus's death and seeing his body burning on the funeral pyre, Achilles mourns, and the description is painful to read as it would have been to witness. He had to be held back "so that he could not use an iron knife to slit his throat" (Wilson, 2023, p.285).

He cries and groans and wails so loudly that "his goddess mother heard him from where she sat down in the hollow depths" (Wilson, 2023, p.27). His grief was so loud that it summoned every goddess that lives in the sea to his mother to comfort her, who felt his agony by proxy. Soon, Achilles's sorrow turns to rage, becoming the infamous rage of Achilles. He kills half of the population of Trojans and slays so many of them that it clogs up the river.

When the river god, Scamander orders him to stop, Achilles defeats the deity in battle as well, overwhelmed in his ravenous emotions. The next day, he faces Hector in battle, ready to take revenge for Patroclus. Achilles defeats the Trojan prince, but he does not stop at just killing him. Achilles committed shameful atrocities on noble Hector (Wilson, 2023, p.550). He stripped Hector of his armor, pierced his ankles, strapped them to the back of his chariot, and Achilles drove his chariot around the walls of Troy until the corpse of Hector was so mutilated that it was unrecognizable. In the last book of the Iliad, Achilles was then killed by prince Paris. However, he did not grieve his death, for it means he would be reunited with Patroclus in the other world. Achilles and Patroclus are burned on the same funeral pyre and their ashes mixed together in the same urn and buried in the same place.

The progression of Achilles as he descends into madness is a clear sign of his grief following the death of his closest companion. This would be cited as a traumatic loss or trauma caused by the sudden death of a loved one (Corr et al., 2019, p.238). Achilles expresses several of the different ways grief can be experienced, such as feelings of sadness and anger, behaviors of poor appetite and mass killings (anger or rage), social difficulties of isolation and difficulties in functioning, and spiritual searching of hostility toward the gods and resentment to himself as a demigod. However, Achilles does not demonstrate all of the stages of grief as suggested by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross; he never bargains with anyone, nor does he accept his feelings of sorrow.

His initial response is denial, but it is extremely brief, slipping immediately into depression as he mourns over his friend's corpse until it was replaced by anger, during which he killed the man that killed Patroclus and then killed himself.

Death and grief were extremely common topics in the ancient world. The symptoms of what contemporary people would call post-traumatic stress disorder were called "divine madness" by the Greeks (Plato, ca. 380 BCE/1997), or "*theia mania*," a term first coined by Plato (Plato, *Phaedrus*, c. 244a-245c). It was considered a godly intervention of the mind. When soldiers return from war, they would often be considered sufferers of this divine madness. After Plato, Socrates categorized the divine madness into four categories,

each one given by a different deity in the Hellenic pantheon: prophetic madness given by Apollo, initiatory madness given by Dionysus, poetic madness given by the Muses, and erotic madness given by Aphrodite and Eros. It was believed that the oracle of Delphi was given the gift of prophetic madness by Apollo. Although the Greeks, especially the Athenians, were well-known for their love of logic and thought, "non-rational thinking, madness, alteration of consciousness, and even near-death experiences were very common and partly institutionalized in ancient Greece" (Ustinova, 2018, p.5). The divine madness from combat was a familiar sight to the Greeks in this way. War was brought by their gods, therefore it made sense to them that those returning from war would be affected by the gods. This so-called "divine madness" that the ancients experienced after their wars are some of the earliest understandings of post- traumatic stress disorder.

Overall, Homer's *Iliad*, specifically the last eight books of the epic poem, demonstrate the understandings of trauma and death by the ancient Greeks, especially in a battle or war-based setting. Following the madness and wrath of the demigod Achilles, readers are given a violent, visceral reaction to the death of a close loved one and how it could affect the mind of an already psychologically impacted individual. The poem's harsh reality that death is always a possibility, even to those who seem invulnerable, provides insight that dying is inevitable act that will befall everyone and everything on the mortal plane. Grief is a natural part of our lives and can become a powerful motivator under the right circumstances, as seen in the ever-beloved and ever-famous *Iliad* by the poet Homer.

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