

This is an excerpt from an essay entitled "The Function of Book 24 of Homer's The Iliad as a Reprieve"

Although it is the final chapter of the book, it is not the final chapter of the Trojan War, nor the final chapter of the story of Achilles. Thus, the term conclusion is not quite adequate in describing the function of this chapter for a number of reasons. First, the term conclusion denotes that the events of this chapter are the ultimate events of the story and are the ending points of the narrative. This could be argued if the poem was called the Hektoriad, thus implying that it was the story of Hektor. If the story was focused on Hektor, then at least we could say that the events that occur within the story culminate in the conclusion of Hektor's life, and so we could label it a conclusion in the sense that it concludes the story of Hektor. However, this is not the case.

From the title, we denounce that this is not the story of a single soldier, but of the city of Troy itself. The conclusion of book 24 does not correlate with the fall of Troy, and in fact is far from doing so, therefore we cannot label book 24 a conclusion to the events of the story because the story has not yet ended. In reality the term neglects to encapsulate a much larger and richer narrative. If the story ended at Book 24, then Troy would still be standing, Odysseus would have never made it home, Aeneas would never have founded Rome, and the poem of Troy would be ruined. This is why I turn to the term reprieve: it takes into account that the book is a break in tension for the overarching story of the fall of Troy, without imposing finality upon the events that occur within nor the events of the overall story.

The Iliad, is not a tale of growth. It is not built around emotional development, nor do its characters alter their core beliefs in any significant way. It is not a tale of Achilles'

movement from wrath to anger, nor is it a praise of his eventual self-control. No, the focal emotional point of the story is clear from the inaugural sentence of the poem: “Sing, goddess, the *anger* of Peleus’ son Achilleus” (The Iliad 1.1) and this anger, this divine wrath, is the driving and undulating constant that the poem is built upon. It is the ground on which the very pillars of the poem are built, and even the destruction of those pillars—plot structure, setting, chronology—much like the destruction of the city of Troy, could not cause the destruction or dilution of the theme of Achilleus’ unearthly anger. That being said, we see a thematic movement from this anger to a brief moment of sympathy in Book 24. Achilleus is the embodiment of passion and wrath, and Homer still depicts Achilleus as “in his standing fury” (Homer, 24.22) in the beginning of the book. However, the thematic focus of the book is still pity and sympathy, as the actions of the characters more closely align with these in reaction to the previous instances of anger and wrath. For example, we see that as a direct result of Achilleus’ desecration of Hektor’s body, Apollo “had pity on him [Hektor]...and guarded the body from all ugliness” (Homer, 24.18-20), and again when Priam exclaims “take pity upon me remembering your father, yet I am still more pitiful” (Homer, 24.503-504), which directly results in Achilleus being “in pity for the gray head and the gray beard” (Homer, 24.516) when describing Priam.