

Summary and analysis of Books 18 Iliad

MJC ENGLISH, SEM II

Summary: Book 18

When Antilochus brings word to Achilles of Patroclus's death, Achilles loses control of himself. He weeps and beats the ground with his fists and covers his face with dirt. He utters a "terrible, wrenching cry" so profound that Thetis hears him and comes with her water-nymph sisters from the ocean to learn what troubles her son (18.39). Achilles tells her of the tragedy and insists that he shall avenge himself on Hector, despite his knowledge that, should he choose to live the life of a warrior, he is fated to die young. Thetis responds that since Hector now wears Achilles' armor, she will have the divine metalsmith Hephaestus make him a new set, if Achilles will delay exacting his revenge for one day.

Thetis departs, and Iris, sent by Hera, comes to tell Achilles that he must go outside and make an appearance on the battlefield. This appearance alone will scare the Trojans into abandoning the fight for Patroclus's body. Achilles leaves his tent, accompanied by Athena, and lets loose an enormous cry that does indeed send the Trojans fleeing.

That night, each army holds an assembly to plan its next move. In the Trojan camp, Polydamas urges his comrades to retreat to the city now that Achilles has decided to return to battle. Hector dismisses the idea as cowardly and insists on repeating the previous day's assault. His foolhardy plan wins the support of the Trojans, for Athena has robbed them of their wits. Meanwhile, in the Achaean camp, the men begin their mourning for Patroclus. Achilles has men clean Patroclus's wounds to prepare him for burial, though he vows not to bury him until he has slain Hector. Thetis goes to Hephaestus's mansion and begs him to make Achilles a new set of armor. Hephaestus forges a breastplate, a helmet, and an extraordinary shield embossed with the images of constellations, pastures, dancing children, and cities of men.

Like the nighttime interlude, the forging of Achilles' new armor helps set a tone of dramatic expectation in the poem. The magnificence of the armor's beauty seems to bespeak its equally magnificent strength. The language describing the shield proves especially compelling and constitutes an example of the literary device *ekphrasis*. *Ekphrasis*, a Greek word literally meaning "description," refers to the description of visual art in poetic terms.

This device effectively allows Homer to filter an artistic subject through two layers of imaginative rendering. In the case of Achilles' shield, the use of *ekphrasis* allows Homer to portray poetically not only the images appearing on the metal but also the effect of those images. For example, figures embossed on a shield cannot really move, of course, but Homer portrays them as dancing spiritedly. By doubling up two artistic media—artistic etching and poetry—Homer endows the described images with an enhanced dynamism and aesthetic force. The *ekphrasis* here also serves to create a sense of contrast in the poem. *The Iliad* is a highly compact narrative, compressing the turning points of a ten-year conflict into a few days of battle. Yet the shield passage expands this setting to a timeless universe. At this moment, the poet stands back from the details of physical violence and personal vendettas to contemplate the beauty of the larger cosmos in which they take place.