Contents

Lesson 2
The Cast of Characters and Characterization

Objectives

- To understand the different groups making up the Achaeans

- To give credible evidence from the text to support one's conclusions about characterization

- To understand point of view in *The Iliad*

Notes to the Teacher

What are called the Greeks or Achaeans were an amalgam of different clans. According to tradition, after news of Helen's abduction reached Menelaus in Crete, Menelaus sought help from his brother Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, then the largest of the Greek city-states. They then enlisted help from the rulers of other, smaller city-states to retrieve Helen (and treasures taken with her) from the Trojans. Some of these men had also been suitors of Helen, whose father, Tyndareus, had made all suitors swear they would support whomever Helen chose as her husband. The men also understood that they would receive riches from the spoils of war. Indeed, a quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles over one of the captive women—a spoil of war—opens *The Iliad*.

Much of Book 2 is spent cataloging the Achaean troops. Historians have noted some inaccuracies in the list, particularly the inclusion of place names that no longer existed by the time the Trojan War was supposed to have taken place. By tradition, composition of *The Iliad* has been credited to an Ionian poet by the name of Homer, working in the late eighth century or early seventh century B.C. Critics speculate that Homer catalogs places belonging to the much earlier Mycenaen age (the period roughly between 1600 and 1100 B.C. that was named for Mycenae, the largest of the Greek city-states) for several reasons.

One explanation is that this catalog was meant to strike a chord with members of the audience who might hail from a place where those earlier Mycenaen communities had been. A second explanation is that the inclusion of so many place names reflects the cooperation of the Greek city-states in Homer's time in a Panhellenic Greece. A third explanation is that Homer might simply have been reaching back to an earlier, more heroic time that would reverberate with the audience. In fact, the author of *The Iliad* might have written the catalog for all three reasons.

In terms of the characters, a second point should be made. For the most part, *The Iliad* will be told from the point of view of the leaders or aristocrats (*aristoi*), rather than that of the common soldier. Accordingly, the list of central figures reflects that. When a member of the rank and file is mentioned by name in *The Iliad*, that person usually either serves as a foil to the *aristoi* or is used to show the tenuous position of a common soldier in war. Thus, in Book 2 there is the exchange between Odysseus and Thersites (2.211–77), who merits neither mention of his lineage nor his place of origin. In the beginning of Book 2, Zeus sends a dream to mislead Agamemnon, convincing him to prepare a direct assault on Troy. First, Agamemnon decides to test his men's courage by telling them that they could return home. To Agamemnon's surprise, the men eagerly head for their ships, and Odysseus sets out to stop the exodus. Odysseus urges the Greek men of rank to rally their men to stay and fight, and reminds them of prophecies foretelling victory in the ninth year of war (2.188–97). But when Odysseus meets a common soldier muttering against the war, Odysseus beats him with a scepter and hurls insults (2.198–206).

Another important example is found in Book 22. There Hector chooses to face Achilles on the battlefield, and near-certain death, rather than risk being criticized by the men and women of Troy, but especially by men inferior to him (22.105–10).

Procedure

1. Distribute **Handout 2**. This is a map of the region noting the places from which the different groups had sailed. Explain to students that when *The Iliad* was composed,

Greece was not a unified country but was a loose confederation of city-states. Ask: "How many subgroups could we divide America into? (*Southern, Eastern, Democrat, Republican, Native American, Mexican American, Italian, etc.*) Explain to students that there were many subgroups within the larger group called Achaeans. If a wall map is available, locate Greece on a map of Europe.

2. Ask students the following questions.

   • Why would Homer have included in his catalog of ships places that no longer existed in Homer's time? What would he have hoped to accomplish?
   (*He might have wanted his readers/listeners to make associations with a more heroic past. He might, too, be reflecting the growing idea of a Panhellenic Greece.*)

   • Can you think of other authors who have also made use of a past that would resonate emotionally with readers?
   (The Scarlet Letter *reflects the values of Nathaniel Hawthorne's age as much as Puritan values but is situated in a previous time when ideological differences were clearer. Arthur Miller's* The Crucible, *recognized as a criticism of the McCarthyism of the mid-twentieth century, is set in the period of the Salem Witch Trials, perhaps to disguise, or make more pointed, Miller's criticism.*)

3. Distribute **Handout 3.** An index of names is included with most translations of *The Iliad*. More information is available on the Internet at the Encyclopedia Mythica Web site (http://www.pantheon.org).

Suggested Responses:

1. Achilles—*Greek; the main character of* The Iliad, *the greatest warrior on the Greek side. His mother was Thetis, a goddess, and his father was Peleus, a mortal. Achilles is prevented from reaching his potential by his pride and rage.*

2. Agamemnon—*Greek; the commander of the Greeks, king of Mycenae, brother to Menelaus. Agamemnon demands respect from the other captains, even though sometimes he makes choices based on emotions or self-concern.*

3. Ajax—*Greek; largest and bravest of the Achaeans, second-best warrior after Achilles. He fights Hector in hand-to-hand combat, but at the end of the day, neither is victorious. A draw is declared, and the two exchange gifts.*

4. Andromache—*Trojan; Hector's wife. She reminds readers of the tensions between domestic ties and the desire for glory in battle. She represents the fate of women on the losing side of war.*

5. Hector—*Trojan; commander of the Trojan army and the arch nemesis of Achilles. He also serves as a contrast to Achilles, particularly in Hector's close ties to his family.*

6. Hecuba—*Trojan; Priam's wife. Hector's mother.*

7. Helen—*Trojan; the wife of Menelaus, either taken captive or seduced by Paris. She was said to be the most beautiful mortal woman. (Some students might place Helen on the side of the Greeks.)*

8. Menelaus—*Greek; king of Sparta, one of the Greek captains, brother to Agamemnon. Menelaus's wife, Helen, had been taken by Paris.*

9. Nestor—*Greek; king of Pylios, oldest and wisest of the Greek captains. In* The Iliad, *he has the role of counselor. He serves as a contrast to Agamemnon, who sometimes acts rashly or with self-interest.*

10. Odysseus—*Greek; king of Ithaca. With Nestor, he represents age and experience. Odysseus is known for his ability with words, as well as for his prowess.*

11. Paris—*Trojan; a son of Priam and Hecuba, and a prince of Troy. He is also Helen's new "husband" or lover. During the course of* The Iliad, *Paris shows little desire to enter the war. His relationship with Helen, apparently based on physical attraction alone, is contrasted with the more*

mature relationship of Hector and Andromache.

12. Patroclus—*Greek; close friend of Achilles. His presence serves as a contrast to Achilles. Patroclus is often shown serving others. After the tide turns against the Greeks, he looks for a way to help the Achaean troops.*

13. Priam—*Trojan; king of the Trojans and father of Hector and Paris. Priam's feelings for Hector evoke an emotional reaction in Achilles.*

4. Discuss the following questions as a class.

   • What positions do these characters have in their society?
   (*They have property and money; they are kings, queens, princes, and captains.*)

   • How do we know this? What evidence from the text provides this information?
   (*There are clues from the beginning of* The Iliad. *Achilles and Agamemnon argue over spoils of war that they feel are due them. In Book 2 there is the exchange between Odysseus and Thersites [2.211–77], who merits neither mention of his lineage nor his place of origin. In battle, the accomplishments of the common soldiers rarely are singled out.*)

   • What does this characterization tell us about the point of view, the perspective from which the literary work is written, in *The Iliad*?
   (*For the most part,* The Iliad *will be told from the point of view of the leaders or aristocrats rather than that of the common soldier.*)

5. Distribute **Handout 4**. Explain characterization as the way an author depicts a particular character or characters. We form a perception of a character by what the narrator tells us about the character, what others say about him or her, and what the character says and does. Explain that sometimes what a writer does not mention is important, too. We are reminded often in *The Iliad* of the importance of hospitality (*xeinos*). Ask: "How does this throw a shadow over the behavior of Paris?" (*By taking Helen from Menelaus, Paris violated the hospitality of his host.*)
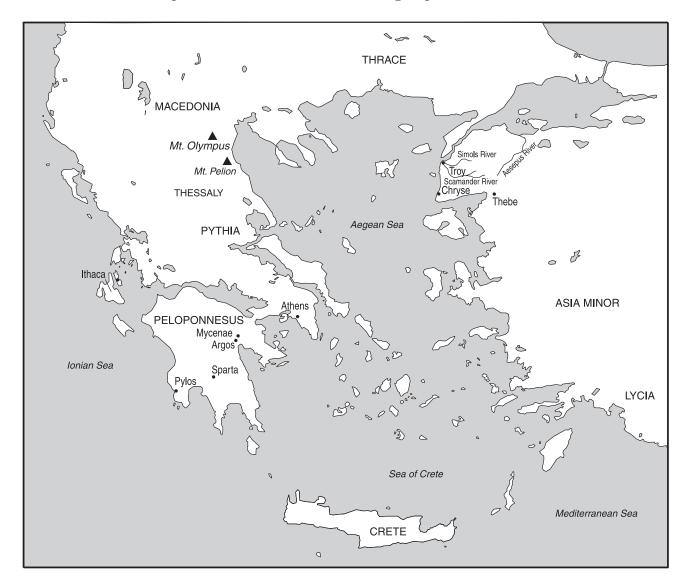
6. Review students' responses to **Handout 4**.

   Suggested Responses:

   1. *"god-like"; "across his shoulders the hide of a leopard"; "with long strides"; "out in front of the army"*

   2. *Near the beginning of the book, Menelaus describes Paris as handsome but weak, an animal ready to be attacked. He also thinks of him as a "robber" and in 3.349–54, he speaks of Paris's violation of the hospitality that was shown to him. Hector describes Paris as being aware of his attractive appearance, "mad for women" whom he seduces, and an embarrassment to his family and community.*

   3. *Menelaus is thrilled at the prospect of facing Paris and getting revenge. He leaps down from his chariot, fully armed. The presumption is that he is confident that he can easily take Paris. Menelaus is depicted as leaping down, ready to fight, while Paris is described as parading and flaunting. Hector hurls insults at his brother, Paris.*

   4. *Paris retreats behind the Trojan troops, afraid of Menelaus. Paris agrees with Hector's criticism though he blames the gods for taking Helen. He agrees to face Menelaus.*

7. Note that in *The Iliad* Paris seems not to suffer personal punishment for his violation of *xeinos*, though in some accounts of the fall of Troy, Paris is finally killed by Menelaus. Ask: "Even though Paris seems not to suffer personal punishment in *The Iliad*, is there a cost to his actions?" (*Paris has lost the respect of his brother, family, community, and even Helen. Ultimately, of course, Troy is doomed to fall.*) Assign students an essay about Paris's character. Be sure to include your guidelines regarding format and length.

8. Assign Books 4 and 5 in preparation for Lesson 3.

Name _____

Date _____

The Achaeans and Trojans

Directions: Note the places from which the different groups sailed.

THRACE

MACEDONIA

▲ Mt. Olympus

▲ Mt. Pelion

THESSALY

Simols River

Aesepus River

Troy

Scamander River

Chryse

Thebe

PYTHIA

Aegean Sea

Ithaca

ASIA MINOR

Athens

PELOPONNESUS

Mycenae

Argos

Ionian Sea

Sparta

Pylos

LYCIA

Sea of Crete

Mediterranean Sea

CRETE

A Cast of Characters

Directions: Below are some of the central mortal characters in *The Iliad*. Identify each as Greek or Trojan. Then provide a brief description and family background for each. For what is each known in *The Iliad*?

Character	Greek/ Trojan	Description
1. Achilles		
2. Agamemnon		
3. Ajax		
4. Andromache		
5. Hector		
6. Hecuba		

Character	Greek/ Trojan	Description
7. Helen		
8. Menelaus		
9. Nestor		
10. Odysseus		
11. Paris		
12. Patroclus		
13. Priam		

Name _____

Date _____

How Are Characters Depicted?

Directions: An author provides hints about how to interpret a character through what the character says, what a character does (or how a character behaves), what others say about that character, and what the narrator says about that character. Book 3 of *The Iliad* provides hints about how the reader is to see Paris. Answer the following questions.

1. How does the poet describe Paris?

2. How do other characters describe Paris?

3. How do other characters act toward Paris?

4. How does Paris react to other characters?