Glory, Fate, and Immortality Through Art: Reimagining Homer’s *Iliad* Across Generations

Fig. 1. *Hero Without a Cause*. Liu, Mae. 21 November 2021.
When it comes to Greek tragedies with their tales of unhappy heroes and morally gray deities, few have been quite as prolific in artistic recreations as Homer’s *Iliad*. From ancient sculpture to modern screenplays, the story of Achilles’ anger—and the calamitous consequences he faces as a result—has been reimagined in countless forms. How, then, might modern artists choose to visually interpret the words of poets long past, and how does this compare to artists from other time periods? My digital painting, *Hero Without a Cause*, stems from the *Iliad*’s motif of an inescapable destiny, and the power struggles between the gods and mortals that attempt to change it all the same. Through the use of composition, colour symbolism, and allusion, I juxtapose Achilles’ rage towards his fate with the futility of his struggle. This analysis will delve into how these stylistic choices build upon Homer’s text, as well as how Baroque painter Peter Paul Rubens’ rendition of a similar scene—*The Death of Hector*, circa 1630-1635—compares and contrasts with my own.

To begin, the body of Patroklos lies before the aggrieved Achilles at the base of the painting. Though he is brought to Achilles in the text, rather than fetched by the hero himself, the inclusion of this violent imagery highlights the impact of his death on Achilles’ psyche. Our protagonist is shown wading through the river god Xanthos, “the water...reddened with blood” accordingly (Homer 21.21). Though Xanthos complains that his “waters [are] crammed with corpses” and “congested with the dead men [Achilles kills] so brutally,” I chose to depict only Patroklos amongst the other bodies, effectively highlighting his unique standing in Achilles’ heart (21.218-220). The hero’s dishevelled appearance also directly corresponds with the text, after having “caught up...grimgy dust,” “poured it over his head and face, and [scattered] the black ashes” over himself (18.23-25). Thus, while the nature of their intimate relationship has been subject to debate for centuries, the psychological toll Patroklos’ death takes on Achilles is undeniable in both text and painting.

Next, dense swathes of red and black evoke an oppressive atmosphere of violence and wrath, while the gradient into shadow at the bottom symbolises Achilles’ march towards his own doomed fate. Achilles’ expression of anguished determination is directly inspired from his fight with Aeneas in Book 20. Likened to a lion or “baleful beast” that “men have been straining to kill,” Achilles “whirls, jaws
open” before “[hurling] himself straight onward on the chance of killing some one...or else being killed himself” (20.164-174) Firstly, this savage imagery—visually emulated in his blond mane and glowing eyes—alludes to Achilles’ unrivalled standing amongst the other warriors, as the lion is often considered the ‘king of the jungle.’ More importantly, however, Homer’s arbitrary tone is reflected through Achilles’ fearless body language in the face of his impending death; he neither cares who he kills nor if he himself is killed in the process. His loss of rationality after Patroklos’ death thus reduces him to an animal-like killing instinct, reflected in the painting’s disorienting, murky waters as well as the piece’s title. Blessed with the greatest skills in combat yet destined to die young, Achilles is truly a hero who grapples with his life’s aim, eventually losing his most beloved companion to the sole endeavour meant to bring him purpose. Thus, my uses of colour theory and Achilles’ body language effectively parallel the point of heightened tragedy in the Iliad, where loss has given way to senseless vengeance.

Next, my portrayal of Apollo at the painting’s centre symbolises the Iliad’s recurring theme of divine intervention. Though many gods were directly involved in combat (Athene in the killing of Hektor, for instance, or Poseidon saving Aeneas from Achilles), Apollo was at the forefront of Patroklos’ death (22.229-247, 20.288-325, 16.790-800). His imposing position and lighting evoke an aura of reverence, while his relaxed stance and serene expression allude to his power to manipulate mortal affairs with ease. For instance, when Apollo distracts Achilles from Hektor by adopting the appearance of Agenor, he muses that Achilles “will never kill [him]” as Apollo simply “[is] not one who is fated” (22.7-13). His unconcerned tone highlights the disparity between gods and mortals as the Trojan War is hardly a matter of life and death for Apollo—unlike Achilles and Patroklos’ case below. Moreover, as Apollo is often seen carrying out Zeus’s orders, his central position in the painting alludes to his role as a bridge between the higher gods’ will and the mortal realm. The golden strings dangling from his fingertips are akin to a puppeteer’s, showing his orchestration of Patroklos’ demise, and how regardless of Achilles’ determination, the final verdict always falls into the palms of gods and Fates. Finally, the bow in his hand foreshadows his guidance of Paris to shoot Achilles’ heel—though the string is relaxed, it hovers over Achilles’ neck like a guillotine, an effective reminder of the gods’ ultimate power over mortal lives.
Hence, I use lighting and symbolism to highlight the privileged role of the gods in the Iliad, directly juxtaposing the sense of free will Achilles’ dynamic posture initially seems to evoke.

Throughout the Iliad, Zeus and Hera have conflicting interests—Hera supports the Achaian onslaught against her hated Trojans, whilst Zeus must honour Thetis’ request to aid the Trojans until Achilles rejoins. As king of the gods, however, Zeus’s decision can dominate both the events on earth and the behaviour of the gods, a theme I depict through elements of contrast. This is first shown in Zeus and Hera’s sheer sizes relative to the overall composition, visibly overpowering the mortals since “always the mind of Zeus is a stronger thing than a man’s mind”(16.689). By using clouds to obscure them, Liu alludes to the impervious nature of Zeus’ will—mortals below can never fathom or influence the choices made above them, whereas the gods easily overpower the rest of the painting. Most noticeably, the colours shift from a fiery palette to a clear blue, evoking a calmer atmosphere unaffected by the suffering below. I therefore reference how trivial the gods perceive mortal plights as in comparison to their own immortality: Apollo deems mortals insignificant in his refusal to fight Poseidon, and Hera stops Hephaistos from hurting Xanthos as it is “not fitting to batter...an immortal god for the sake of mortals”(21.462-467, 21.379-380). Even Zeus is “amused in his deep heart for pleasure, as he [watches] the gods’ collision in conflict”(21.389-390). Thus, my stark colour contrast visibly juxtaposes their lack of concern with the massacre Achilles unleashes. This dichotomy between the invincibility of the gods above and the brutal death of Patroklos below reiterates the overarching tension between mortals and the divine explored throughout the Iliad.
The Death of Hector (c. 1630-1635), one of eight tapestries Peter Paul Rubens created of Achilles’ life, shares several similarities with Hero Without a Cause, primarily in the portrayal of the power dynamics between gods and mortals. Immediately, Achilles’ violent posture is mirrored in both pieces, his rippling red cape a common symbol of anger and heroism. Athene’s presence does for Ruben what Apollo does for my piece, juxtaposing the carnage on earth with the ephemerality of divine intervention. Appearing in a similar apparition of clouds and light, Athene seems able to withdraw herself from danger at any desired moment. In contrast, the mortals remain pressed against the ground with nowhere to run from their fate. However, Ruben’s piece primarily focuses on creating a detailed scene,
whereas *Hero Without a Cause* employs more of a symbolic composition. Ruben only uses symbolism to frame the piece: despite supporting the Trojans, for instance, the bust of Ares is shown looking away, suggesting both godly apathy towards mortals and powerlessness against fate (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen). Moreover, Baroque art was concerned with the flow of time and motion—evident in Ruben’s series of scenes as opposed to the combination I present (Fleming 2-4). The period also emphasised a piece’s spatial depth to enhance its narrative quality, seen in the framed foreground, the duel in the middle ground, and an intricate background of the war, with the angle catering to the passive role of an audience (8). *Hero Without a Cause*, however, changes the angle of the story entirely, thrusting the spectator into the role of Hektor. At its core, I intended for the audience to feel engaged with the story: often, the consensus of younger scholars studying antiquity is how intimidating that tangible distance is—between the texts and ourselves. By placing them at the forefront of the battle, I aim to cast away some of that obscurity, and illustrate how ancient stories carry themes that continue to resonate with our world today. Hence, though both pieces employ similar motifs, their composition ultimately reflects the time period they hope to appeal to. In my case, I use modern techniques like graphic line art, vivid colour blocking, and even a titular allusion to a classic movie—*Rebel Without a Cause*—to draw attention to themes of the *Iliad* that are able to transcend the passage of time.

By manipulating composition, colour symbolism and allusions, I reimagine Achilles’ grapple with the prophecy bestowed upon him in a contemporary style. While parallels can be drawn between my work and Rubens’, disparities in design and intention highlight the differences in how meaning is constructed between our time periods. No matter the era, however, the widespread influence of Homer’s *Iliad* remains indisputable, continuing to grip new generations of readers at every turn of the century. For instance, Achilles’ existential angst, fed by the expectations of a relentless society, are strangely reminiscent of our own complex coming-of-age emotions, while many LGBTQ+ youth continue to find solace in the implicit love shared between him and Patroklos. As with all great stories, these interpretations are bound to keep changing: beyond the archaic tales of glory and more towards an age-old
question about the price of pride—whether on a personal or nation-wide scale—and the universal struggle to find one’s path in a world that too often seems out of our control.
Works Cited


