



An Explication of the Iliad

Due Date: Monday, 7 March 2011

Length: 5-7 pages



This assignment asks you to argue a thesis about Homer's *Iliad*. A thesis is a claim that requires substantiation through sustained argument. The thesis that you choose for this assignment will allow you to explicate some aspect of the *Iliad*—that is, it will necessitate that you elaborate upon, explain, or clarify something that you have observed about the *Iliad*. Your thesis and the argument you use to support it should demonstrate that you have given critical thought to the text. For example, you might argue, "The *Iliad* is about humanity's tragically hopeless struggle to prevail over the uncontrollable and chaotic forces that ultimately determine our destiny." Such a thesis not only requires supporting reasons, but it promises an explication of the *Iliad*; that is, it suggests a better understanding of Homer. Another possible thesis is, "Above all other Homeric characters, Helen emerges as the true hero." Again, such a thesis demands argumentation and suggests to the reader (whether rightly or wrongly—which is here entirely beside the point) a better understanding of our Homeric text.

Your thesis must not attempt to argue the obvious. For example, it would be pointless to argue, "The *Iliad* demonstrates Homer's belief in divine intervention in human affairs." Although it is apparent that Homer did believe in divine intervention, this is an appearance that should be obvious to any casual reader of Homer. Thus, it requires no argumentation. As a general rule, when choosing your thesis, avoid that argument in regard to which you cannot imagine an informed audience disagreeing. Rather, select an argument that *demand*s explication, one that you know you will have to defend against objections. A more intriguing argument would be, "The *Iliad* invites demythologization, and so suggests that the poet did not truly believe in the myths which he employed as literary devices." Such a thesis is satisfactory in that it meets the criteria of demanding a sustained defence or argument and in that it holds out the promise to the reader of a better understanding of Homer. In addition, if you are aware of possible objections that readers of the *Iliad* might make in regard to your thesis, you should address those objections within the course of your explication.

Approximately four weeks before this essay is due you will be required to submit to me a tentative research theme. The purpose of this is to ensure that, as you are reading the *Iliad*, you are also focusing on and taking notes in regard to a particular subject. It is imperative that you take notes as you read and not wait until after you have read Homer, as failure to do so is likely to result in the omission of many relevant citations and references in your essay. A research theme is not a thesis; that is, it is not an argument, but is a focal point out of which a thesis, ultimately, will emerge. As you choose your theme, keep in mind that a good research paper will demonstrate depth of analysis and close reading; it will reveal critical thought and sophistication in argumentation; it will not present a synopsis of the narrative or any part of the narrative.

Two weeks before this essay is due you will be required to present a tentative thesis, along with *at least* two supporting arguments (including textual citations), in a brief synopsis of 100-200 words. This must be e-mailed to me before class on Monday, February 21. These will be consolidated into one Word Doc. (including your e-mail addresses) and distributed to the class for the consideration and response of your classmates. You will also be required to respond critically, expressing reasoned agreement or disagreement, to two of your classmates' theses and argument synopses. Both of these e-mail responses must be cc'd to me before class on Monday, February 28. Your participation in this exercise is equivalent to participation in a rough draft workshop, and failure to participate will lower your final essay grade up to one full letter (*e.g.*, from an A to a B).