

WHY WE READ THE CLASSICS AT
ARISTOI CLASSICAL ACADEMY

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Central to a classical education is the study of great texts that have stood the test of time. Many schools today use literature as a means to teach vocabulary or skills. However, at Aristoi Classical Academy we believe stories provide invaluable insight into the human experience. We learn about ourselves when we study characters as diverse as Penelope and Huckleberry Finn and delve into the worlds of Ancient Greece and the Antebellum South. Even if these settings seem alien to life in 21st century America, a thoughtful reading of the classics directs students to consider the nature of man, morality, and the universe itself. At Aristoi we maintain that students of all ages were made to wrestle with such matters! Although a good story should capture our imaginations, literature does not merely entertain but affords us rich opportunities to contemplate what it means to be human.

A seminal text in a classical education, and one that an Aristoi freshman reads, is Homer's *Iliad*, which tells the story of the Trojan War and its brooding hero Achilles. At first glance, it may seem difficult to glean a moral order from a tale that centers around the bloodshed and violence of the battlefield. However, Homer's universe is a profoundly ordered and beautiful one in which man is given a choice between virtue and vice. This is evident upon the shield the blacksmith Hephaestus fashions for Achilles before he pursues revenge against the Trojan hero, Hector. Knowing that her beloved son is destined to die, Thetis asks Hephaestus to make a splendid suit of armor for Achilles. His shield consists of nine concentric circles that display different aspects of the Ancient Greek world. These

include the sky with the sun, moon, and stars, one city at peace and another at war, fields at harvest-time, a vineyard, a festival, and the mighty ocean. Overall, the universe illustrated upon the shield is a harmonious place in which man works the land and enjoys the fruits of labor. Harvests and livestock are bountiful, and it even seems as if the ploughed earth is of “gold” (Homer 18: 548-549). Women create lovely “tunics of finespun work” for the men to wear, as they partake in a joyous feast together.

While the shield of Achilles displays both the beauty of the ancient world and man’s opportunity to find happiness within its borders, it also depicts the choice man must make between good and evil.

This is evident through the “two cities of mortal men” (18:490-491). In the first city the citizens know the benefits of law and order, as they submit their disputes to wise judges who render “the straightest opinion” (18:508). The second city is besieged by warring factions who vie for



'The Shield of Achilles' Kathleen Vail

dominance, with “Hate..Confusion..and Death” ruling the day (18:535). The difference between the two cities is that the first has chosen to bind itself to just laws while the second has not. Homer shows that man is a creature of volition who must choose what is good for the sake of himself and others. It is only when man commits himself to a law higher than that of self-preservation that society may flourish and enjoy times of peace. The shield can thus be understood as a microcosm of the *Iliad* itself in which man’s destiny is determined by the choices he makes.

The warriors in the *Iliad* are bound by conventions that help maintain order even amid the chaos of war. Indeed, the oaths they make are central to the story, as they pledge to fight for their people and to avoid bringing shame upon their fathers. They are also expected to show magnanimity to those beneath them and respect the right of their enemies to grieve the deaths of their loved-ones. After being lighted by Agamemnon at the beginning of the epic, Achilles chooses to remove himself from society and

is only compelled to return after Hector kills his beloved friend Patroklos.



**'Achilles Lamenting
the Death of
Patroclus'**
Gavin Hamilton

When he reenters the arena, Achilles is consumed by rage and he brazenly defies the customs of the ancient world. At first, he is incapable of showing mercy, callously remarking to one of his victims, “So, friend, you die also. Why all this clamor about it?” (21:106). After successfully killing Hector with the help of Athena, Achilles refuses to return the body and instead drags it around the walls of Troy within sight of Hector’s family. The gods, who have inserted themselves in the fighting throughout the story, recognize Achilles’ misdeeds and protect Hector’s body from further harm. Poignantly, when Hector’s father, Priam, bravely entreats Achilles to return his son to him, Achilles is able to let go of his anger. Bowing low before Achilles, Priam dares to “put [his] lips to the hands of the man who has killed [his] children” (24: 506). Achilles is so moved by this grieving father that he begins to weep for his own father, who has passed, and for Patroklos as well. As they grieve together, Achilles finally surrenders his rage and finds peace.

**'Priam Pleading
with Achilles for
the Body of
Hector'**
Gavin Hamilton



This scene between Achilles and Priam is at the heart of the *Iliad*. Indeed Achilles' humanity is restored when he chooses to grieve alongside the father of his enemy. This is in sharp contrast to the 20th century world W. H. Auden describes in his 1952 poem *The Shield of Achilles*. In the poem, Thetis looks over Hephaestus' shoulder as he forges the shield for her son, but in the place of "well-governed cities", she sees "an artificial wilderness/and a sky like lead" (Auden lines 3, 7-8). There is no beauty upon this shield and certainly no choice between good and evil. Instead, the modern world is ruled by statistics and faceless leaders who command apathetic armies. Disillusioned by the horrors and atrocities of two world wars, the West grew increasingly nihilistic by the mid-20th century. Auden references the *Iliad* as a means of lamenting this cultural shift, ending his poem with a description of an orphan "who'd never heard/Of any world where promises are kept,/Or one could weep because another wept" (lines 72, 78-79). Unlike the heroes of Homer's epic who fulfill their oaths and find comfort in sharing in the suffering of others, this poor child knows no such reality, his existence marked by loneliness and despair.

"One Could Weep Because Another Wept"

Homer shows us through Achilles' shield and story arc that we must bind ourselves to considerations greater than our own self-interest. Although this is certainly not the only insight Homer offers us, it is one that I emphasized to our juniors when they began their study of the 20th century by rereading Homer's description of Achilles' shield alongside Auden's poem. Although separated by more than 2500 years, these two works of art paired together speak powerfully to the human condition and ask us to consider how we should live in relation to one another. This is precisely why we study literature as a part of a classical education at Aristoi Classical Academy. Great texts are not merely diversions from life but tools that help us live well. Although Achilles' world is quite different from our own, there is much we may learn from it. At Aristoi Classical Academy, we want to partner with our parents to help their children see the choice upon Achilles' shield and learn to "weep because another wept". May we, as the adults in their lives, endeavor to do the same.

WORKS CITED

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The Shield of Achilles by W. H. Auden, published by Random House. 1955 W. H. Auden, renewed by The Estate of W.H. Auden. Used by permission of Curtis Brown, Ltd.

