

# ***A Contradiction Between Nobility and Cruelty: An Analysis of the Duality of Achilles' Character in 'Iliad'***

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**Abstract.** Achilles in Homer's epic 'Iliad' has created a lofty model of ancient Greek heroism. However, its glorious image is accompanied by its chilling cruelty: This kind of sharp opposition and strange coexistence of nobleness and cruelty makes Achilles transcend the thin heroic symbol and become an immortal contradiction full of internal tension. Although the academic community has achieved fruitful results in its dimensions such as heroism, honor concept, god-man relationship, anger theme and tragic fate, the existing research rarely systematically integrates this pair of extreme contradictions in his character, analyzes its psychological and cultural roots, and regards its contradiction as the core artistic means of Homer's ingenuity. In view of this, this paper aims to systematically integrate and deeply explain the dual extremes of Achilles' character, explore the complex causes of its roots in ancient Greek heroic values, destiny cognition and personal emotional trauma, and reveal the artistic effects achieved by Homer by shaping this extreme contradiction. The following conclusions were drawn through research: Achilles' nobility stems from his individual-oriented consciousness, self-preservation, and the calming down after finding an anchor for his sorrow; his cruelty originates from the stress response of a narcissist being humiliated, the manifestation of his animal nature, and the contradictory psychology of "apologizing with death". Homer's portrayal of such an image aims to break the narrative of war violence, question the meaning of war and heroic ethics, and reveal the identity of human destiny.

**Keywords:** Achilles, 'Iliad', character, double-sidedness, hero values

## **1. Introduction**

Achilles in Homer's epic 'Iliad' defined the model of ancient Greek heroism with his outstanding qualities, such as bravery and sincerity. However, its noble brilliance is accompanied by its brutality: the devastating anger that erupts from the humiliation of honor not only leads to its refusal to fight, resulting in a crushing defeat of the coalition forces, but also drives him to humiliate Hector's body in extreme ways after revenge. This kind of sharp opposition and strange coexistence of nobleness and cruelty makes Achilles transcend the simple heroic symbol and become an immortal contradiction full of internal tension. Although the academic research on Achilles is fruitful, involving his heroism, honor concept, God-man relationship, anger theme and tragic fate, a significant limitation is that the analysis of his noble quality and the criticism of his cruel behavior

are often in a relatively fragmented state. The existing research rarely systematically and organically integrates this pair of extreme contradictions in his character, deeply analyzes its specific performance and deep roots, and regards it as an artistic means of Homer's ingenuity to explore its core role in shaping complex characters and strengthening tragic tension in epics. In view of this, this study tries to break through the single-dimensional interpretation framework and systematically integrate the dual extremes of Achilles' character, trying to understand Achilles.

## **2. Analysis of the noble character of Achilles and its causes**

As the soul of 'Iliad', the image of Achilles first shines with remarkable noble brilliance. This kind of nobleness is not a virtue of a single dimension, but a product deeply rooted in the soil of ancient Greek heroic culture and under the joint action of divinity and individual consciousness.

### **2.1. The emphasis on honor: the concentrated expression of individual standard consciousness**

In the era of ancient Greek heroes, Achilles's defense of honor was almost paranoid because it was the ultimate yardstick of individual life value and social existence significance. When Agamemnon seized her booty prisoner Briseis, Achilles regarded it as an open trampling on her personal value and dignity. This sense of humiliation led directly to his angry withdrawal from the battlefield, even knowing that the move would put the Greek coalition at risk. This extreme sensitivity to personal honor is precisely the concentrated expression of the awakening of the "individual standard consciousness" in ancient Greece. Qin Deyue established the connection between Achilles' emphasis on honor and the consciousness of individual standard in 'The brave's unfading flower-Analysis of the image of Achilles in ancient Greek works': 'He is not confined to fatalism, not afraid of difficulties and obstacles, and faces death with awe, which is the great righteousness of heroes. This also reflects the spiritual and cultural characteristics of ancient Greece: 'pay attention to the value of life for the individual, with a strong sense of individual standards. The spirit of daring to fight against destiny has a strong humanistic color, which makes its humanity more intense, without fear of hardship. The courage to die generously for dignity still encourages generations to fight for themselves and fight against destiny [1].' Under the influence of the individual standard consciousness, the hero is no longer a vague symbol attached to the collective, and its unique value, dignity and due respect constitute the core of existence. Achilles' anger is essentially a declaration of the inviolability of the value of individual independence and a strong echo of the awakening of 'I am who I am' in the heroic era.

### **2.2. Valuing friendship: preserving the other's self**

The most moving brilliance in Achilles' character is the profound friendship between him and Patroclus beyond life and death. Homer described Patroclus's position in Achilles' heart as 'the dearest partner' [2]. This kind of friendship is far from the feelings of ordinary comrades-in-arms, closer to the other half of the soul. Arieti, James A., illustrates their connection in a sentence in 'Achilles' Guilt.' 'Patroclus, who withdrew from battle along with him, has re-entered the war; and as he is Achilles' alter ego, he necessarily involves Achilles in [3].' Just because of this, the world of Achilles suddenly collapsed when Patroclus was killed by Hector in order to save the Greek allied forces and fight under the armor of Achilles. The depth of his grief and the determination of revenge are all derived from the cherishing of this unique friendship. The death of Patroclus is not only the loss of a close friend, but also the cruel deprivation of a part of Achilles' self-identity. His endless

pursuit of Hector is the ultimate action to defend the "other half of self" and the ultimate expression of his emotional depth and loyalty.

### **2.3. Forgiveness to the enemy: individual sadness to find the anchor after the calm**

The noblest sublimation of Achilles' character appears at the end of the epic - his forgiveness of Priam, the old king of Troy. After many days of crazy revenge and humiliation of Hector's body, Priam, who dived into the tent late at night alone, kissed his hands and begged for the return of his son's body, accidentally touching the common chord of mourning in the depths of Achilles' heart. The old king mentioned that Achilles was far away from his hometown's elderly father, Peleus, so Achilles thought of his father and shed tears', which proved that Priam's love awakened Achilles' complex feelings about his own destiny and family [2]. Subsequently, Priam dined with Achilles, and this daily behavior became the 'anchor point' of Achilles's violent emotions, so that his boiling anger and sadness found an outlet for catharsis and calm. Emily Austin in 'Achilles' Desire for Lament: Variations on a Theme' discusses the reason why Achilles forgives Priam: 'When grief is aimless, it begets cycles; and only when grief becomes more targeted does one emerge from these cycles. This is not to say that the underlying source of grief can be healed or solved. Achilles cannot embrace Patroclus' shade, nor can his dead friend receive and reciprocate his attempts at honoring him or conversing with him. Yet when Achilles begins to direct his activity towards ends that can be achieved—sharing a meal with Priam, gazing at him in admiration—he has somehow moved beyond his irresolvable grieved state [4].' Achilles' intense emotions were relieved by the specific act of dining with Priam, which allowed him not only to return Hector's body, but also to agree to a truce with Priam. This compassion and reconciliation that transcends the boundaries of the enemy and the self not only shows the deepest empathy ability in the human nature of Achilles but also shows the dissolution of individual grief in specific behaviors. The sea of brutal anger, in the face of another ocean of the same deep sadness, the two with specific small things as a link, finally came to a deep, common understanding of human destiny and calm.

### **3. Analysis of Achilles' cruel character and its causes**

With the noble characteristics of Achilles, it is his trembling cruelty. This kind of cruelty is not a simple moral degeneration, but a tragic outbreak under the joint action of its extreme personality, specific cultural context, psychological trauma and fate shackles.

#### **3.1. Indifference to war: Narcissists' stress response to humiliation and rebellion against heroic ethics**

Achilles's almost callous disregard for the war is not simply cowardice or selfishness, but the violent reaction of his individual personality structure after the devastating blow to his core values. The analysis of Achilles' narcissistic trauma can refer to Marshall A. Greene's discussion in 'Homer's Heroes, Narcissistic Characters': 'Once shame is actually experienced, it can be relieved by boasting or acting grandly if the shame is of small intensity, or by humiliating the humiliator if the intensity is great. Therefore, boasting, grandiose behavior, and especially the attempt to humiliate others, are signs that shame is the motivating emotion. If humiliation is extreme (i.e., mortification) a narcissistic rage is likely to follow. In a narcissistic rage, reality testing is lost and the humiliated individual will attempt to humiliate or destroy the humiliator without regard to the consequences [5].' Achilles' self-identity is highly dependent on the core identity of 'the most outstanding Greek

warrior ' and the honor it brings. Therefore, in the face of Agamemnon's extreme humiliation, Achilles deeply felt that his self-worth was severely damaged, which led to the anger of Achilles at the beginning of 'Iliad'. This complete disregard for the war is a violent 'stress response' to Agamemnon's humiliation. It is a typical defensive posture of a narcissistic personality after the core value is damaged, through a thorough 'withdrawal' to punish the other party and maintain the damaged self. His insistence on staying in the camp also reflects the psychological fortress established by narcissists after their trauma. The physical and psychological space composed of barracks and ships has become a fortress for its injured self, isolating the external world that denies its value. Here, he declares the 'presence' and 'irreplaceability' of his deprived value by refusing to participate, refusing to contribute his indispensable power. At a deeper level, this also implies a fierce resistance to the drawbacks of the ancient Greek heroic ethical system. William Sale mentioned in ' Achilles and Heroic Values': 'Achilles chose glory rather than long life, the heroic choice par excellence. But glory depends on *geras*; the smaller the *geras*, the smaller, so far as the world knows, the military excellence for which that *geras* stands. Without a consistent recognition of heroism, war is meaningless, and if war is meaningless, the Achaean society, which lives by war, has no right to exist [6].' *Geras* meant trophies, while Achilles fought for the community, but because of Agamemnon's words, he could not get the due share of *geras*, which also represented that the heroic quality of Achilles could not be recognized by the world. At this time, the hypocrisy and fragility of the ethical system were exposed. Chinese scholar Li Ling's "ethical feelings from the anger of Achilles" also has a similar statement: 'In that era of frequent wars, people also formed a certain standard for the distribution of trophies, according to the size of the contribution in the war to distribute the rules of trophies are also generally accepted. Agamemnon's behavior is contrary to the distribution system that has been formed, so it cannot be recognized by the public [7].' Achilles's refusal to fight is an extreme way to expose the inherent contradictions of the "honor exchange" mechanism on which heroism is based. It is a "silent" resistance to the priority of community values over individual values. His tent became a torn symbolic wound within the heroic society.

### **3.2. Insult to the corpse: the crazy catharsis of trauma, the ambivalence of 'thanking death for sin' and the refraction of racial prejudice**

The brutal humiliation of Hector's body by Achilles is one of the most appalling scenes in 'Iliad'. Its cruelty stems from the interweaving of multiple psychological motivations.

#### **3.2.1. The portrayal of its own animality**

The great psychological trauma brought about by the death of Patroclus plunged Achilles into irrational rage. The abuse of Hector's body is a manifestation of Achilles ' own animality. The despair that grips Achilles after the death of Patroclus is therefore not a simple emotion: it is mixed with suffering and anger. The latter has several components: anger against Hector and the Trojans, Achilles' discontent with himself, and an irritated expectation of death [8]. Whether it is the action description of ' eating ' or the mentality of seeing the enemy as a dog, it reflects the cruel, bloodthirsty and indifferent animal nature of Achilles' character. It is this uncivilized animality that makes Achilles make an amazing act of masochism in his anger.

### **3.2.2. The ambivalence of 'thanking death for sin'**

Achilles's insistence on killing Hector by cruel means is actually a kind of ambivalence of "death for sin." Here, the death in 'thanking death for sin' superficially refers to the death of Hector but actually refers to the death of Achilles. That is to say, Achilles tried to guide his death with the death of Hector and redeem himself for the sin of his waywardness that led to the deaths of a large number of Greek soldiers. James A. Arieti makes a similar point in 'Achilles's guilt': 'Achilles tries to destroy the body, in a sense, to kill Hector again, for by killing Hector he will be killing himself. His mutilation of Hector's body is really an attempt to bring upon himself the finality of death [3].' In Achilles's cognition, Hector, the Trojan hero who killed Patroclus and was able to kill himself on the battlefield due to his absence, became the embodiment and substitute of his own sin. Killing Hector is symbolically equivalent to killing the 'old self' who caused the disaster due to willfulness. At the same time, he also internalized Hector's death as a replacement and rehearsal of his own death, and tried to use this 'alternative death' to pay for the heavy sin of his own death of a large number of Greek soldiers due to his willful refusal to fight. By continuously desecrating and belittling Hector's body, Achilles seems to be continuously punishing and destroying the 'self' that caused the disaster, trying to 'wash' his own blood debt. Refusing to bury means refusing to let this "scapegoat ceremony" end, refusing to let Hector, the symbol of his sin, get rest, and refusing to admit the final settlement of his sin. This is a desperate, pathological attempt to seek inner salvation through external violence.

### **3.2.3. The results of racial prejudice and dehumanization of 'the other'**

It must be admitted that the atrocities of Achilles also originated in part from the ancient Greeks 'potential' otherization 'perspective of the Trojans. As a hero of the Trojans, Hector's humanity may be naturally lower than his own in the eyes of Achilles and some Greek soldiers. Levin, Saul's 'Love and the Hero of the Iliad.' Describes the prejudice of the Greeks against the rest of the races at that time: 'But the Greeks not only projected their hatred of recent or contemporary barbarian enemies back upon the Trojans. They also identified them with the despised Phrygians who still inhabited part of the region.' 'The Iliad itself was interpreted according to the Greeks' bias that their ancestors were right and the enemy wrong [9].' This subconscious racial or camp prejudice provides a weak psychological excuse for violence, making cruel acts more 'legitimate' in the hearts of the perpetrators and exacerbating the cruelty of the atrocities.

## **4. The influence and effect of Achilles' character's double-sidedness**

It is no accident that Homer combines such extremely sublime and appalling cruelty in Achilles. This profound contradiction has enhanced the artistic achievement, ideological depth and eternal charm of 'Iliad'.

### **4.1. Breaking the repeated violent narratives in the war: the complexity and inevitability of shaping tragedy**

Traditional war narratives often shape heroes as a single-dimensional symbol of bravery. The two sides of Achilles completely broke this stereotype. His nobleness makes him the embodiment of heroic ideal, and his cruelty makes him the destroyer of a heroic ideal. He was not only an indispensable guarantee for the victory of the Greek Allied Forces, but also the culprit for the large number of casualties of the Allied Forces due to his personal anger. The internal tear of his power's



transformation between the two characteristics of nobility and cruelty makes every step of his choice full of great tension, and every step leads to deeper individual and collective tragedy. The transformation of his force throughout the story has provided suspense for the boring, repetitive violence of war, which is also mentioned in Roland A. Champagne's "The Force of Achilles in the Iliad [10]." This makes Achilles' character become the core engine driving the epic plot, so that the war is no longer just an external fight, but also the externalization of the hero's inner storm, which profoundly reveals the tragic inevitability of the individual being torn by fate, emotion and his own limitations under the halo of heroism.

#### 4.2. Adds unparalleled authenticity to fictional artistic figures

The contradiction of Achilles gave him a shocking sense of reality. According to Yin Zhijia's discussion on the heterogeneity of Eastern and Western cultures-on Achilles's "character," the reason why Homer portrays such a real character is precisely because Western literature pursues the tradition of the true face of human nature: 'Western literature pursues the 'character' of the character, or 'personality', which is the true face of human nature and 'authenticity', that is, the 'reality' in the law. In Western literary works, almost no fixed and worshipful 'character' is shown, but their eternal charm lies in the 'reality of character' [11]. Reviews online in 'The heart of Achilles: characterization and Personal Ethics in the Iliad' prove the artistic effect of Homer's doing so: 'for art such as the Iliad 'invites us to treat characters as if they were real people [12]. 'He is neither a morally perfect man nor a pure demon. His courage and affection are admirable; his arrogance and cruelty are frightening and disgusting. He refused to fight because of the damage to his honor, lost control of his anger because of the tragic death of his close friend and felt compassion because of the pleading of his enemy's old father. The transformation of these extreme emotions and behaviors, though intense but not traceable, is rooted in the core of their personality, that is, the absolute loyalty to self-worth and the fierce collision of specific situations. The core connotation of Achilles' self-worth 'is the absoluteness of honor, excellence and individual dignity. Honor is the public recognition and quantitative return of its excellence, such as trophies, social status, reputation and so on. Excellence is Achilles' self-cognition, such as his own extraordinary strength and semi-god blood, unmatched courage and decisive role in the battlefield; the absolutization of individual dignity means that it cannot tolerate any form of domination, coercion or violation of its autonomy. These qualities make Achilles' behavior traceable: anger at Agamemnon's capture of female prisoners reflects his absolute demand for honor and individual dignity; the anger at the death of Patroclus reflects his excellent maintenance of himself, because the act of not fighting to protect his friends has hit Achilles' own ability and value. At the same time, the nobleness and cruelty of Achilles represent his 'self' and 'id' respectively, and the regulation of 'self' to 'id' also makes Achilles' heroic image more perfect and fuller [13]. The complexity and mobility of this character make him get rid of the symbolization of mythological characters and have real human weaknesses, emotional fluctuations and psychological struggles like flesh and blood. Readers can see the great brilliance of human nature and the abyss of darkness in him at the same time, thus generating strong resonance and reflection.

#### 4.3. Deepening the questioning of the meaning of war and hero ethics

The image of Achilles is itself the most profound torture of the meaning of war and the ethics of heroes. His bravery brought victory and endless killings, such as the massacre of the innocent River Troy; his pursuit of personal honor is the cornerstone of heroism, but his humiliation directly leads

to the death of a large number of comrades [2]. His act of revenge for friendship is full of moral appeal, but his means of revenge trampled on the basic bottom line of human relations. In 'Achilles and Heroic Values.', William Sale reveals Homer's questioning of the meaning of war through the image of Achilles: 'The events of Books 1 and 2 show a terrible flaw in Achaean society, that glory can be denied by the antics of a weak and jealous king. But do they do more? They cause us to wonder whether a set of values so precariously maintained is in itself worthwhile [6].' Through the contradiction and pain of Achilles, Homer relentlessly reveals the absurdity and irrationality of the war itself and exposes the inherent vulnerability and potential destructive power of the traditional heroic ethics with honor as the core. Achilles' ultimate compassion, though shining with human glory, cannot restore the havoc that has been caused. This forces readers to think: Is the price of the heroic value system centered on personal honor and violent revenge too heavy? Under the glorious narrative of the war, how many distortions of human nature and the scars of civilization are concealed?

#### 4.4. Showing the identity of human destiny: the common suffering beyond the camp

The dual orientation of Achilles' character and its ultimate trend profoundly shows the universality and identity of human destiny. Priam claimed that he was unhappier than Peleus, but Achilles told him that, in fact, he, like Peleus, got a mixture of good and evil from Zeus, so he had the same fate as most human beings [8]. Whether the Greeks or the Trojans, whether strong as Achilles, Hector, or the aging Priam, they all get the dual character of both good and evil from the gods, so they will eventually move towards the same tragic fate: Achilles' own and coalition's misfortune caused by anger, Priam's death in his later years, humiliation and reconciliation. These sufferings transcend the opposition of the camp, and at the same time show the ancient Greeks' thinking about life: character determines destiny. When the son of the demigod has human nature, he will also move towards the same fate as ordinary human beings. The scene of Achilles and Priam weeping against each other in the camp is one of the epic's most powerful moments. It shows that in the face of the deep grief of losing a loved one, in the face of an irresistible fate, the boundary between the enemy and the self becomes blurred, and the Greek heroes share the same fragile and fateful human situation with the old king of Troy. The contradiction of Achilles ultimately points to a universality that transcends the individual and the camp: human beings are not only the carriers of lofty ideals and deep emotions, but also the prisoners of anger, paranoia and violence; people not only strive to pursue glory and meaning, but also inevitably go to decline and nothingness. This profound insight into the essential contradiction of human existence makes 'Iliad' transcend a simple war epic and become a great, sad song about the common destiny of mankind.

#### 5. Conclusion

Achilles, the 'contradiction between nobleness and cruelty', is the most brilliant crystallization of Homer's genius art. His brilliance and shadow, greatness and defect, affection and violence, so sharp opposition, and so weird symbiosis, together weave his thrilling, tragic fate. It is this irreconcilable contradiction that makes him one of the most complex, real and interpretive immortal images in the history of Western literature. He defined the height of ancient Greek heroism and deconstructed its purity. He is not only the son of God, with extraordinary power and destiny, but also carries the most profound human struggle and pain. Through the prism of Achilles, Homer not only shows the tragedy of war and the energy of heroes, but also profoundly reveals the complex spectrum of human nature itself, as well as the vulnerability and dignity, glory and darkness of all life under the

wheel of fate. The contradiction of Achilles, in the final analysis, is the ultimate projection of humans' own predicament in the heroic era. His eternal charm is derived from this profound truth that strikes the soul and triggers infinite reflection.

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