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Simone Weil: The Iliad, or The Poem of Force Study Guide

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SIMONE WEIL: THE ILIAD, OR THE POEM OF FORCE STUDY GUIDE, 2011

Steven Alan Samson

http://people.virginia.edu/~jdk3t/WeilThelliad.pdf

Outline

 A. FORCE IS THE TRUE SUBJECT OF THE ILIAD (6 	۹.	FORCE IS	THE TRUE	SUBJECT	OF THE ILIA	D (6-7
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- 1. Human Spirit Modified by Force
- 2. Definition: Force Is the x That Turns Anybody Subjected to It into a Thing
- 3. Undiluted Bitterness of Such a Spectacle
 - a. No comforting fiction intervenes
- 4. Poignant Evocation of Another World
- B. THE FORCE THAT DOES NOT KILL QUITE YET (7-13)
 - It Turns Man into a Stone While Still Alive
 - 2. What It Costs
 - a. Violence done to a person's nature
 - 3. Defenselessness in Face of a Weapon Poised to Kill
 - a. Supplication
 - b. Hector's shock
 - c. Loss of galvanic response
 - 4. The Suppliant (or Supplicant) Loses the Right to Tremble
 - a. Priam [father of Hector], Book 24
 - b. Chilling sight
 - 5. Power of a Person's Presence
 - a. What is normal: Stepping aside for a passerby
 - b. This indefinable influence is lacking in those turned as to stone
 - c. These stones lie fallen unless someone deigns to pick them up again
 - 6. The Successful Suppliant Becomes a Human Being Again
 - a. Others become things for the rest of their lives
 - b. Compromise between man and corpse
 - c. The idea is a logical contradiction but true in life
 - 7. Agamemnon's Claim on Chryseis [daughter of Trojan priest]
 - 8. Hector's Fears for Andromache, Book 6
 - 9. Andromache's Lament for His Child, Book 24
 - 10. Memory Barely Lingers On
 - a. Fidelity to his city and his dead is not the slave's privilege
 - 11. Instead the Slave Weeps at His Master's Pain
 - 12. Love for the Master
 - a. Gratitude for hope and compassion
 - Briseis [Achilles'Trojan concubine] lamenting the death of Patroclus, Book 19
 - 13. Slave Loses His Whole Inner Life
 - a. A fragment may return in hope
 - b. Empire of force
 - 14. Tyranny over the Soul Is Like Extreme Hunger
 - a. Aloneness of the weak man [also noted by Hobbes]
 - b. **Zeus's gifts** (two urns or casks), Book 24
 - c. **Pitilessness of force**: It crushes victims and intoxicates victors
 - 15. Common Soldier Is Subjected to the Indignity of Orders and Abuse
 - a. Odysseus' abuse of a soldier, Book 2

- b. Odysseus strikes **Thersites**, Book 2
- 16. Achilles's Helpless Grief and Humiliation
 - a. Agamemnon's Pride (hubris)
 - b. Agamemnon's humiliation (*Nemesis*)
- 17. Everyone's Shameful Experience of Fear
 - a. Hector's challenge
 - b. Ajax's bold response
 - c. Ajax's terror
- C. BLIND DESTINY (13-14)

C.

- 1. Zeus's **Golden Scales** [Expression of Fatalism]
- 2. Destiny Establishes a Kind of Justice
 - a. Those who take up the sword perish by it
 - b. Our own blindness
 - 1) The strong and the weak seem to be separate species
 - 2) No room left for reflection
 - 3) The harshness and madness of the victors
 - What goes around will come around
 - 1) Humiliation of Achilles
 - 2) Achilles' grudge and satisfaction at Athenian reversals
- 3. The Triumphant Fail to Foresee Their Own Destruction
 - a. Balance is overlooked
 - b. Lack of hesitation
 - 1) Hubristic license
 - 2) Excess
 - Commitment to Chance (Fortune) leaves them exposed
- D. **RETRIBUTION**: THE SOUL OF THE EPIC (14-17)
 - 1. Nemesis
 - a. *karma* [*Kharma*]
 - 2. Game of Seesaw: Victor Forgets to Treat Victory as a Transitory Thing
 - a. Helen came within reach
 - 1) Desire for booty took the Greek eye off the prize
 - b. Hector's foreboding
 - 1) Greek flight
 - 2) Hector refuses concessions
 - 3. Hector's Wish is Granted
 - a. Reversal of fortunes
 - b. Greeks again put to flight
 - c. Patroclus' arrival
 - d. His death
 - e. Counsel of Polydamas rejected
 - 4. Hector is Lost
 - a. His aloneness
 - b. Ignominy
 - c. Vain supplications
 - 5. Brief Joy Brought by Various Reversals
- E. IDEAS OF A DESTINY THAT IS THE GREAT EQUALIZER
 - 1. Victor and Victim Bring Misfortune to Each Other
 - 2. Moderate Use of Force Requires Superhuman Virtue
 - a. Prestige rests on indifference
 - b. Irresistible Temptation
 - 3. Voice of Reason
 - a. Thersites
 - b. Achilles
 - c. Words of reason drop into the void
 - d. Meddlesome gods
 - 4. Simplest Traps Pitch Men into Harm

- 5. Initial Illusion that War is a Game
 - a. Escapism
 - b. Danger becomes an abstraction
- 6. The Day When the Warrior's Spirit Crumbles
 - a. Unbearable hardness
 - b. For the soldier death is the future
 - c. The soul castrates itself of aspiration
 - 1) War effaces all conceptions of purpose
 - 2) Inability to conceive wars end
 - d. Intolerable sufferings continue by the force of their own specific gravity
- 7. Deliverance Seen in the Aspect of Destruction
 - a. A limited profit is too painful to contemplate
 - b. What will compensate for Ithaca's ruin?
 - c. Troy and Helen are mere sources of blood and tears
 - d. Only remedy is destruction of the enemy
 - e. Rivalry in death [cf. Girard]
- 8. Despair Drives Him to Death and Slaughter
 - a. Man possessed by this twofold need for death
 - b. What echo can the timid hopes of life strike in such a heart?
 - 1) Lykaon to Achilles
 - 2) Achilles' reply
 - c. It is too much to expect a respect for life from such
- 9. Patroclus: the Noble Exception
- F. FORCE'S DOUBLE-EDGED POWER TO CONVERT MAN TO THING
 - Battles by Men Deprived of Their Faculties
 - a. Last secret of war
 - 2. Panic
 - 3. Art of War is the Art of Producing Such Transformations
 - a. Petrifactive quality of force
 - 4. Wantonness of the Conqueror
 - a. Despair wholesale slaughter
 - b. Uniform horror
 - 5. Luminous Moments
 - a. Finding one's soul
 - b. Movement of love
 - c. Tradition of hospitality
 - d. Filial love
 - e. Conjugal love
 - f. Friendship between comrades-at-arms
 - g. Friendship that floods the hearts of mortal enemies
 - 6. Our Sharp Regret at What Violence Has Killed
 - Note of Incurable Bitterness
 - 8. Justice and Love Bathe the Work in Light
 - 9. Victors and Vanquished are Sharply Etched
 - 10. Greatest Calamity that the Human Race can Experience: the Destruction of a City
 - 11. Evocations of the World of Peace are Felt as Pain
 - 12. Whatever is Not War is Wrapped in Poetry
 - 13. Cold Brutality of the Deeds of War is Left Undisguised
- G. EXTRAORDINARY SENSE OF EQUITY IN THE ILIAD
 - 1. Origins
 - a. Thucydides: Achaeans were conquered 80 years later
 - 2. Justifiable Bitterness
 - a. No one is spared
 - 3. Only True Epic of the Accident
 - a. Odyssey
 - b. Aeneid

- 4. Attic Tragedy is the True Continuation of the Epic
- 5. Gospels
 - a. Passion
 - b. Peter and the Trojan lad
- 6. Destiny and the Human Soul
 - a. Greek spirit
- 7. Romans and Hebrews
 - a. Job
- 8. Spirit of the Gospels
- 9. Something of the Greek Genius Persists
 - a. When the rediscovery of the epic genius might occur

Review

Zeus's gifts pitilessness of force Thersites
Zeus's golden scales retribution greatest calamity