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Parenting through Pain

Losing a child to death is one of the hardest trials a mother and father can go through. In the natural progression of life, the parent should die first. Unfortunately, many parents must learn how to live without their son or daughter. Tragedies such as this happen more frequently in the *Iliad*, because of the war raging around Troy. Hector deals with the possibility of not seeing his infant son ever again when he goes out to fight the Greeks, but he pushes down his fears and wishes for his son to have a long, fulfilling life. Thetis is aware that her son is going to have a short life, yet she chooses to assist him as best as she is able. Priam loses his beloved son Hector and has to balance his responsibilities in life with his grief over the death of his son. These interactions between parents and children translate easily into modern life, because working parents have to leave their children every day as Hector did. Similarly, mothers have to care for children with terminal illnesses, which relates to Thetis's relationship with Achilles, and fathers such as Priam have to deal with the death of their child. These relevant concerns show that the *Iliad* has themes pertinent to modern civilization. Especially when dealing with parent's coping with their child's death and the different reactions to such trials, the *Iliad* highlights relevant themes which can be applied to contemporary society.

Hector did not have absolute knowledge of his son Astyanax's death, yet he was forced to view it as a possibility. He tells his wife, "[M]ay the heaped earth cover me over dead / before I ever hear your cry as you are dragged away" (Homer VI. 464-465). While he only addresses his

wife in this section, the passage suggests that he would feel the same way about his “cherished only child,” Astyanax (Homer VI. 401). Although he realizes that his duty to his city and father call him to enter the battlefield, Hector “shows a set of priorities that are more domestic than heroic,” (Farron 42). He believes his strength could defeat the Greek armies and keep them away from his family. Unfortunately, “Hector’s love offers his son no protection,” as he is unable to save himself, ultimately fating Astyanax to an early death (Pratt 30). Hector is unwilling to accept such a brutal future for his child, and before he leaves for battle, he prays for his son’s future: “[O]ne day may someone say of him, ‘this man is far better than his father’ / as he returns from war, and may he bear back bloodstained spoils of armor, / having killed an enemy man, and his mother’s heart rejoice” (Homer VI. 479-481). Hector refuses to believe that his son will die an early death, instead rejoicing in Astyanax’s possibilities for life. Hector shows a strong belief that what he hopes for will ultimately come to pass, even as he realizes the possibility of an unexpected tragedy.

Hector shows the struggle that all parents endure when they leave their children: the possibility of their child’s death, or their own. The realization of this possibility is hard for a parent to process, especially when the child is a toddler, like Astyanax. Parents face this in modern times every day, with the threat of a car accident or other tragedy hanging over their heads. Instead of giving into this fear, parents are required to do their duty and provide for their children, as Hector provided for the possibility of a bright future for his son. In fact, “parents must provide the safest environment possible for toddlers” (Turner 42). Their responsibility in life is to make sure that their child is safe. Parents are required to work past their worry for their children dying, or having to live without them, and do what is right for the child, no matter what. When speaking of the *Iliad*, Pratt says that “[i]t certainly gave them [the Greeks] some strong

images to suggest that a very high standard of care for children was the noble, and even the natural, activity of parents” (40). When someone gives birth to a child, their highest priority must be the safety of that new life. No matter what worry a parent faces, their highest calling is always to provide for their child, even if that means leaving them for a little while, as Hector did. Parents must cherish and protect their children, as either of them could die before seeing one another again.

Thetis, on the other hand, knows her son Achilles will die. Patroclus’s death eliminates the slight possibility that Achilles had to live a long life. When Achilles tells Thetis of his goal to kill Hector out of revenge, she mourns, saying “you will die soon, my child, from what you say” (Homer XVIII. 95). Although Achilles’s fate is absolute certainty at this point, Thetis still desires to help him in his pursuit of vengeance. Even though his death looms as a great shadow over their limited interactions, she cherishes all the moments they have together before he dies. Thetis cannot persuade Achilles against his course of action, forcing her to accept his imminent death. Instead of giving into her grief, she decides to help her son fulfil his final wishes. Thetis also shows the natural progression of blame found when a child is going to die. She asks Hephaestus, “Who of all the goddesses on Olympus, / endures in her heart so many bitter cares, / as the griefs Zeus the son of Cronus has given to me beyond all?” (Homer XVIII 429-431). She needs to direct her pain and anguish into activity to assuage her pain. She chooses not to blame herself, or Achilles, for the choices leading up to his death, and instead encourages him in his pursuit of glory. Thetis struggles with how to balance her grief and her ability to help her son in limited time he has left.

Thetis’s pain relates to a parent whose child is diagnosed with a terminal illness. A parent can hold onto a sense of hope as long as the disease is not confirmed. Unfortunately, as soon as

an unfavorable diagnosis comes back, all hope is lost. This mirrors the hope that Thetis felt before Achilles decides to follow the path that lead to his death. One expert comments that “[p]arents of children with life-threatening illnesses experience heightened positive and negative emotions simultaneously, as they may love and feel proud of their child while at the same time feel sad and angry regarding their child's health prognosis” (Hexem 543). Parents should accept and love their children despite their illnesses, even as they face the anger of dealing with their child’s possible death. A parent with a terminally ill child comes to the realization that “the joy of becoming a parent can be quickly diminished by the profound realization that the child has a lifelong illness or disability” (Coughlin 109). While a terminally ill child still is a source of pride to them, the parent must deal the sorrow of knowing that their child will never live a fully complete life. Similar to the blame that Thetis places on Zeus, parents who place their faith in God can blame him for their child’s misfortunes. Steele notes that many parents “could not see any reason why God would do this to anyone, let alone children” (107). Because of the pain that parents are going through, they struggle to see any benefit to the apparent senselessness of such an illness. Ultimately, like Thetis, parents of terminally ill children need to accept what is going to happen to their child and not completely reject all their convictions.

Priam’s grief is a hopeless mourning, as he is left to struggle with the fact that there is nothing he can do to save his beloved son. Priam can only hope for the closure that would come with a funeral for his son, but he is prevented from even this simple thing by Achilles’s defilement of Hector’s body. He mourns over Hector’s death, saying “Would that he died in my arms” (Homer XXII. 426). Priam is not even allowed the comfort of being with his son while he takes his final breath; instead, he is inside the walls of Troy that Hector dies trying to protect. Priam is forced to move forward, thus “[t]he only thing that truly matters for [him] . . . is that the

spell of mourning be broken” (Hirsch). Not only does Priam have to work through his own grief at the loss of his son, but he also has to worry still about the state of his city and his inability to honor his son in a funeral. Priam must venture to the enemy camp to retrieve his son’s body, and “[h]is bravery on behalf of his son, from whom he can no longer hope to get any kind of payback on his investment, ennobles the old man” (Pratt 40). Once he arrives at the Greeks’ camp, the only way that Priam can appeal to Achilles is by comparing himself to Peleus, Achilles’s father. He pleads with Achilles to “[r]evere the gods . . . and have pity upon [him], / remembering [his] father” (Homer XXIV. 503-504). The idea of losing a child creates a temporary bond between these two enemies, and allows them to understand one another, because the idea of leaving a father childless is present in both their minds. The *Iliad* shows that a parent losing a child is universally acknowledge as a tragedy, and it can cause previous barriers to disintegrate out of common grief. Ultimately, for Priam, this shared mourning with Achilles is part of the closure that he receives after Hector’s death.

Priam’s pain represents heartbreak of modern parents who have lost their children to death. The *Iliad* creates sympathy for bereaved parents by having Priam not only grieve for his son’s death, but also not being able to have a funeral. When Priam is going to rescue Hector’s body from Achilles, he tells his wife that he would “let Achilles slay me at once / after I have clasped in my arms my son, when I have put away all / desire for weeping” (Homer XXIV. 226-228). He does not care whether he lives or dies, if he has one final chance to bid farewell to his son. Wijngaards-de Meij says that “[i]f the unthinkable actually happens and a child dies, parents are confronted with a world that has fallen apart” (237). Priam portrays how devastating it is to lose a child, and how any parent would struggle to rebuild their life afterwards. Priam needs to move on with his life, as every parent must, and can only do that through confronting his son’s

killer and begging for Hector's body back. In a study of different families, "the parents' experiences of coping was highly personal in nature and affected by various situational factors" (Stevenson 660). If a parent only focuses on their grief after a child dies, it becomes too easy to wallow in pain and ignore any personal needs. Priam is still king of Troy and needs to care for his people in this war. While he is intitled to the grief and pain of a parent, there are more responsibilities Priam must worry about. He cannot focus on his grief alone. Kindly, Achilles gives him twelve days to honor Hector's life and sacrifice, which allows Priam to assuage his pain for a small period, before having to focus on his duties again (Homer XXIV. 667). Similarly, parents need time to mourn, but they do have other demands, such as that of other children or a spouse, placed upon them. They must seek out closure, like Priam, to fulfill the rest of their responsibilities.

Literature can portray relevant themes throughout the ages, and the *Iliad* is no exception. While the epic predominantly focuses on war, a careful examination shows how it touches on parents dealing with the death of a child. Hector is not certain that Astyanax will die, but even the possibility of never seeing his child again causes him to mourn. Thetis has to reconcile with the idea that her son will die, something she could not prevent from happening. Priam relies on Hector to protect not only his city, but also his family, and instead of being able to congratulate his son on his victory, he has to beg his enemy for his son's body. All these trials are heartbreaking, but they all point to the different challenges a parent confronts in the contemporary world. A parent walks out of the door every day, uncertain if he will return. Some parents have the hardship of dealing with a terminal illness affecting their child, or even the death of a child. The *Iliad* shows the different ways that a parent can cope with these trials, and

how to face life bravely through them. No matter what concern a parent has about their child, many of those doubts are addressed in the *Iliad*, and can encourage modern families.

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