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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/WeilTheIliad.pdf>

Outline

- A. FORCE IS THE TRUE SUBJECT OF *THE ILIAD* (6-7)
 - 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)
 - 1. 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
 - 1) 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)**
 - 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
 - c. 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
 - c. 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
 1. 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
 7. 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
Zeus's golden scales

pitilessness of force
retribution

Thersites
greatest calamity