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HUM 1A

Critical Thinking Argument

In Book XVIII of Homer's *The Iliad*, Achilles struggles with the fact that his beloved friend Patroclus has died in battle, especially since he is partly responsible after having asked the gods to teach Agamemnon a lesson. However, the goddess Iris comes to our distraught hero with a convincing call for action from Hera: "[Hector] means to impale the head on Troy's palisade after he strips off its skin. And you just lie there? Think of Patroclus becoming a rag bone for Trojan dogs. Shame to your dying day if his corpse is defiled" (lines 187-191). This statement is persuasive to a large degree — to both Homer's audience and a modern one — because of its horrifyingly grisly imagery, and because it reflects the cultural milieu of Homer's time in that the warrior has an important duty to preserve the honor of his brothers in war.

When Iris describes to Achilles specifically how Hector plans to treat Patroclus's dead body, Achilles explains his helplessness due to his lack of armor, but is then inspired to recover the corpse, demonstrating the power of Iris's imagery. Imagine Patroclus's head being severed from his still-warm body, blood oozing sluggishly from the haphazard skin that used to make up his neck. There is an uncomfortable sound as a stake is forcefully inserted into his head, and suddenly the smell of multiple hounds ripping the skin off of his naked corpse wafts into the air. Now picture your closest friend in this position: it is a bit unsettling. Hera wants Achilles to retrieve his dear Patroclus, and having Iris flesh out this awful scene is an effective way of encouraging him to do so, for he cannot bear to imagine his friend in such a degrading state. Even though this is a war, and people are expected to die, this treatment of an enemy's corpse is not just disrespectful, but *savage* to both modern and ancient audiences. By placing the head on their palisade, the Trojans would be gloating cruelly since it would be staring out at the Greeks, just out of reach. The horror of the image makes it a powerful one, and after being indirectly

assured that the gods are on his side, Achilles is inspired to act and eventually kill Hector. He is bitter and willing to die for vengeance, rather than for the defeat he felt before speaking to Iris.

Not only is Achilles inclined to later get revenge, but he is additionally aware that it is his duty to preserve Patroclus's honor. Patroclus was his best friend, but he was also a man respected within the military, and because he died honorably in battle, he deserves to have a proper burial. With regards to Homer's broader cultural milieu, the most celebrated men are those who lose their lives in battle. This type of death is seen as courageous and admirable, as one decides to sacrifice everything he has for the greater good of the army and his people in general. This is why Odysseus whimpers in *The Odyssey*, when believing that he will die at sea, that he wishes he had died when fighting for Achilles' dead body. This is why Hector, as he is dying, begs Achilles to send his corpse back to his parents rather than feed it to dogs. Hector never asks for actual mercy, but merely a chance to leave an honorable legacy behind him with those he loves most. For this reason, Iris's original message to Achilles is effectively persuasive, as he would be deeply ashamed and guilty if he could not bring this ever important and final honor to his friend. Through Iris, Hera appeals to Achilles' sense of brotherhood and duty, even if she slightly threatens him with shame at the same time.

As a human being, Achilles is moved by the imagery of his dead friend, and as an Ancient Greek warrior, he is forced to acknowledge his responsibility to finally bring Patroclus peace in the form of an honorable burial. Iris's message appeals to both his emotions and his sense of duty, and because it moves him to take a stand against his friend's murderer, it is effective in its attempts at persuasion. However, it is ultimately important to note that even

though Achilles is inspired to fight, he still wishes for his death; he can never get his best friend back, and nothing the gods say can persuade him to ever forget that.