Excerpts from “The Iliad and what it still can tell us about war” by Charlotte Higgins, *The Guardian*

Today's students at West Point, the elite US military academy study *The Iliad* as part of their literature course. As you read, consider: What does the Iliad have to say about war, even in the modern/postmodern age?

At the centre of the poem's most urgent observations on the nature of war is its hero, Achilles, an extreme character in all senses - *The Iliad*’s most bloodthirsty warrior, the quickest to anger, but at times the most tender. He is tinged with the supernatural: his mother is a goddess; his armour is forged by the god Hephaestus; even his chariot-team consists of immortal horses, the gift of Zeus. He sees the war with an enhanced perspective; as Alexander points out, he is clear-eyed about the utter pointlessness of the conflict. During his outburst to Agamemnon in book one, Achilles says:

> The Trojans never did me damage, not in the least,  
> they never stole my cattle or my horses, never  
> in Phthia where the rich soil breeds strong men  
> did they lay water my crops. How could they?  
> Look at the endless miles that lie between us . . .  
> shadowy mountain ranges, seas that surge and thunder.  
> No, you, colossal, shameless – we all followed you,  
> to please you, to fight for you, to win your honour  
> back from the Trojans.

"This war is stupid and pointless. It's not our country and it's not our fight," is a view typical of those recorded by Guardian photographer and film-maker Sean Smith when he was embedded among US troops in Iraq.

It is perhaps in the relationships between the combatants that modern soldiers might most readily see their own emotions mirrored. In his book *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, American psychiatrist Jonathan Shay finds parallels between the pathologies of Vietnam veterans whom he has treated, and Homer's Achilles. He argues that Achilles is suffering from what we would now call combat trauma, the death of Patroclus causing his character fatally to unravel. In particular, Shay compares the comradeship and passionate loyalty of American soldiers in Vietnam to that between Achilles and Patroclus – who grew up together, fought alongside each other, and whose relationship is the subject of some of Homer's most tender writing. In book 16 – shortly before he agrees to let Patroclus enter the fighting – Achilles finds him weeping:

> "Why in tears, Patroclus?  
> Like a girl, a baby running after her mother,  
> begging to be picked up, and she tugs her skirts,  
> holding her back as she tries to hurry off – all tears  
> fawning up at her, till she takes her in her arms . . .  
> That's how you look, Patroclus,

Such fierce tenderness is echoed in the conversation of today's British troops fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. Former Guardian war reporter Audrey Gillan was, in 2003, embedded with the Household Cavalry in Iraq. The regiment was initially reluctant to host a female journalist, but she was
later told by the driver of the personnel carrier that became her home "Don't worry, I will never, ever leave you. I will pick you up and carry you if I have to."

American psychiatrist Jonathan Shay, author of *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* records one of his patients recalling his own fury: "I really loved f---ng killing, couldn't get enough. For every one of them I killed I felt better. Made some of the hurt went away [sic]. Every time you lost a friend it seemed like a part of you was gone. Get one of them to compensate what they had done to me. I got very hard, cold, merciless. I lost all my mercy."

Achilles also gets hard, cold, merciless. Even by the standards of *The Iliad*, his killing spree is grotesque. He cannot sleep or eat; he thinks only of killing: "what I really crave / is slaughter and blood and the choking groans of men". He slakes his bloodthirst by felling men, by filling the waters of the Scamander so full of bodies and gore that the river deity himself rises up from the depths in anger. It is "all day permanent red", to borrow the memorable title of one of Christopher Logue's poetic reimaginings of *The Iliad*.

Achilles captures 12 Trojan men whom he will sacrifice on Patroclus's pyre – again, even by the standards of *The Iliad*, a horrific act; today, we would call it a war crime. In book 21, he downs the Trojan prince Lycaon. You captured me once before, says Lycaon, but then, merciful, you spared my life. Do the same now. Achilles responds:

"Come, friend, you too must die. Why moan about it so? Even Patroclus died, a far, far better man than you. And look, you see how handsome and powerful I am? The son of a great man, the mother who gave me life a deathless goddess. But even for me, I tell you, death and the strong force of fate are waiting. There will come a dawn or a sunset or high noon when a man will take my life in battle too – flinging a spear perhaps or whipping a deadly arrow off his bow."

After the loss of Patroclus, all life – Lycaon's, his own – is, for Achilles, utterly meaningless. We are all going to die; we (or at least you) may as well die now. Yet this is an aberration: life does have meaning in *The Iliad*, a meaning that is bound up both with a warrior's *kleos*, the glory he achieves in the field, and, paradoxically, with a hero's willing, onward surge towards death.

At the end of the poem comes the scene between Priam and Achilles, when the frail, grieving father finds it in himself to kiss those "terrible, man-killing hands / that had slaughtered Priam's many sons in battle", when Achilles sees reflected in the face of Priam the likeness of his own beloved father. Weil underestimated the power of this passage. Achilles is not simply an unfeeling "thing", reduced by the unspeakable power of force. The truth may be harder to take. He is at the same time a mass slaughterer and the gentlest of men. Only a few lines of verse stand between the Achilles who wipes away the tears of his beloved Patroclus and the one who piles up hecatombs of the Trojan dead. Find in this comfort, if you can.