The Hero Essay I, Question 2

As an epic revolving around ancient Greek war, Homer’s *The Iliad* provides the clearest example of Greek warriors battling in life or death situations. Scenarios such as these call upon the bravery and virtues of everyone involved, and as such, *The Iliad* clearly reveal the Greek perspective on the ideal Greek hero, while also showcasing which men respond well or poorly — or, which men are heroes or not. The Greeks, as shown in the epic, idealized honor and bravery, traits which were shown by men like Akhilleus and Diomedes. While honor and bravery are clear demonstrators of heroism, in my personal modern conception, these virtues must also be tempered by an awareness as to the ends of their ‘honorable’ pursuits. To this end, Diomedes fits the Greek’s definition of “hero”, while Akhilleus fits my personal modern notion.

Ancient Greece seemed to possess a very strong cultural emphasis on heroes, so it is not difficult to observe how strong its role in *The Iliad* is. The entire Trojan War which the epic writes of began with the ‘theft’ of Helen, the wife of the king of Sparta by Trojan Prince Paris. Spartan King Menelaos was honor-bound (meaning he had to defend honor which he already possessed) to start the war and get his wife back, while conversely, the Greeks who joined him fought for honor which they did not yet have. Honor clearly expresses itself as a heroic ideal in this instance, not through the presence of it, but most assuredly for the communal desire for it. Likewise, those who are most able to achieve honor in visible action-oriented ways become heroic icons for the soldier masses. Powerful figures like Akhilleus, Diomedes, and Ajax create
awe on the battlefield through their skill in battle, and because the average soldier admires these men, it demonstrates that they believe fighting for the ideal of honor with success leads to the description of “hero”; throughout the majority of the Iliad, people are trying to get Akhilleus to join back in the war because they admire his power. Also, because soldiers view Akhilleus as a heroic and honorable character, they would also want to be around him. Since fighting alongside Akhilleus would lead to success, soldiers who fought alongside him would be obtaining it as well.

Contradicting this battle and action focused description of heroism, I interpret modern heroism to require more than just the ability and desire to defend and achieve personal honor, or even to defend the honor of others, but also must think outwardly enough to question why they fight, and to fight for reasons beyond that single-minded scope. It is difficult to say that any of the Greeks are true heroes, because true modern heroes fight on the right side. In this case of the Trojan War, every Greek soldier disregards the immorality of going to force a woman to go back to her husband, and even the immorality of fighting and killing the waves upon waves of soldiers who simply sought to defend their homeland from invaders. The Greeks are on the wrong side, and the fact that no Greek warrior save Akhilleus decides to stop fighting speaks very poorly for all of them. The true argument here is not about who the most heroic Greek is, but more who is the least reprehensible.

Among the Greek warriors, Akhilleus is regarded as the most powerful warrior, and second to him is Diomedes. In his very first appearance, Diomedes demonstrates a very clear ability to defend his honor from the likes of Agamemnon. (Book 4, line 450) Agamemnon insults Diomedes for being weak, saying that “[his] father did not lag like this,” but Diomedes simply takes the reprimand, and states that they should focus on the upcoming battle. Diomedes is not
willing to stoop to Agamemnon’s level, preferring to simply prove himself in battle – which he does. Later on, Diomedes meets great success in battle at the beginning of Book 5 and is the only mortal able to injure a god – Ares. (line 418) Both of these two instances and many others demonstrate how worthy Diomedes is of the title of Greek hero, according to the definition established above.

By the start of The Iliad, Akhilleus has already proved his worth to the Greek warriors. His skill is mostly implied by the Greek’s and Agamemnon’s desire to bring him back into the war while he sits out. Unlike Diomedes, however, Akhilleus seems at least slightly disinterested in the war and its unjust cause, and his decision to leave the war effort is because Agamemnon takes a Trojan woman for himself and offers the lesser one to Akhilleus. (Book 1, Lines 124-220) While this partly demonstrates that Akhilleus is prideful and feels he deserves more, it also demonstrates that he is not one to be fed the spoils of war for their own sake. Additionally, Akhilleus does not rejoin until his close friend Patroklus is killed, whom he then fights to avenge instead of being motivated by personal glory.

As said before, it is of my belief that the Greeks are fighting on the wrong side – they are practically pirating: they pillage and rape as they carve a bloody path into Troy, using Menalaos’s wife as a thin excuse. A true modern hero would feel the desire to remedy this situation and come to either a diplomatic solution or join the Trojans. While Akhilleus does neither, once again, he is the only warrior of his stature who stops, if only for a time, fighting the unjust war. Akhilleus may not as level-headed as Diomedes, as shown through his anger when insulted by Agamemnon, but his honor and pride are still not the motivators for his return to war. (Book 19, line 20)
Both Diomedes and Akhilleus fit the archaic Greek notion of the hero ideal, yet Diomedes, despite no obvious portrayal of flaws, does not once question his cause or stop fighting. He pushes ahead and continues to prove himself in battle, especially in Book 5. Akhilleus, despite flaws, does stop fighting, and is motivated by more than just honor. He is a more complicated character than Diomedes, and that complexity contributes to the heroism of his nature; though he doesn’t stop fighting for the best reasons, and he eventually rejoins anyway, Akhilleus is less blatantly non-heroic than the other Greeks in terms of my conception of the modern hero. When all is said and done, there are no contemporary heroes amongst the Greeks.
Works Cited: