

# How Hector's Funeral Games taught me about a Folded American Flag

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“Once Upon a Time.” Remember those age old words? As children, we hear stories with all kinds of fanciful components: fairy godmothers, magic potions, princes in disguise, evil stepmothers. Yet, when we age into adulthood, we are all too aware of the fictional quality of these stories to enjoy them as our childish minds once did. Stories serve a different function for adults. Through their nostalgic haze, adults attempt to find release in fairytales. They challenge their fleeting imagination in hopes of reliving the ignorant bliss they can never regain. Yet, despite our efforts, fairy tales predominantly act as a juxtaposition to our world, constantly reminding us of what it will never be. If ever a grown, reasonable person, began to live his life based on the ideologies depicted in fanciful stories, society would, without a doubt, denounce him as insane. It is, therefore, curious to consider the role the *Iliad* plays as a piece of common folklore in our society-- as a fairytale of war. In a society where we openly recognize the lack of realism in such stories, we continue to operate under an ideology which identifies with the transcended quality of the classic poem. We refuse to accept the congruency between our actions and those displayed in the *Iliad* because we are trapped in an age-old society which defends the tragedy of war with the childish and unrealistic tenets associated with myths and fairytales.

The *Iliad* uses its traditional dramatic language to depict even the culmination of the poem’s tragedy. The *Iliad* poet is not shy in exploring the death of Hector and the tragic aftermath of his downfall. Hector is consistently described as having a shining helmet, until “his

whole head was dragged down in the dust” (477). The glorious image of Hector is quickly juxtaposed with the linguistic illustration of his head in the dirt after his soul has fled his body. The treatment of his body after death reminds the modern reader of the artificiality of the glory he experienced in life. Glory is meant to immortalize a man, yet it is the first trait to abandon Hector when his life is taken. The *Iliad* suggests the Greeks valued honour and glory over life, romanticizing war and its effects. A modern reader, however, has been barred from sharing these ancient Greek ideals after being exposed to the trauma of war via media. The everyday 21st century citizen presumably understands that, though the romantic ideals of the Greeks are beautiful, the *Iliad* is not a viable basis for comprehending the true horror death in war.

“At last the gods have called me down to death.” (351) Death comes from the gods in the world of the *Iliad*. Yet, with gun control debates at the forefront of our minds, we are constantly reminded that death is not so simply justified. Death is not an evitable payment to the gods. God is who we turn to for comfort after death, which too often seems terribly avoidable, has struck. Not only is death portrayed in our society more realistically, but it exists in our media in a quantity reflective of its true gravity. The horrors of war in the *Iliad* are focused on Hector’s story. Hector’s tragedy, though upsetting and pitiful it may be, does not communicate the sense of general importance that reoccurring Facebook videos of school shooting and mourning army families can evoke.

While we say, “Thank you for your service,” the *Iliad* says something akin to “We glorify you for your sacrifice.” We think of our soldiers as serving our country, not themselves or their glory. The *Iliad* reflects modern society’s intentions back onto our conscious. Are soldiers risking their life for glory or for moral justice? When we scroll through these Facebook videos

are meant to pity them or glorify them? As I am reminded of the permanence and tragedy of death in war, my instinct is not glorify. Our media is constantly reminding us of the tragedy and sadness that persists in our world, and, despite all we've been exposed to, we continue to view death through the rose-tinted lense the poet of the *Iliad* established countless years ago. The conversation the *Iliad* prompts puts the role of war in our society into perspective.

Reading the *Iliad* forces us to answer the question: if not for Fate and the gods, why do we go to war? For the Greeks, war was a duty bound quest to defend the honour of their leader and, more importantly, succumb to the fate of the gods. Athena and Zeus, to the general public in 21st century America, are beautiful myths. Fate is a coward's way of giving up the power over their own life. The modern reader understands these whimsical, fairytale excuses do not stand up against the general intelligence of our society, so why risk the lives of our soldier to fight a war for an imaginary circumstance? We claim to be above such fairytales and childlike fancies. We seem to believe we have some kind of moral obligation to engage in violence of this nature. We recognize the absurdity of the gods acting as characters in the war, yet there is a sense of belief in modern society that the supernatural standard of "moral obligation" plays a relatively active role in war. We get caught up in the thought process of fairy tales. We begin to believe fate is on our side because the good guy always wins. But if we understand that we are in control of our fate, why do we pretend we are not? Why do we continue to go to war as if there is no other option, knowing fighting on the side of moral justice does not lessen the chances of tragedy on either side.

Towards the end of the *Iliad* we are reminded of the humanity of the leaders as Hector's father goes to beg for his son's body and ends up weeping alongside his killer. War has the

power to break down even the strongest of men. We see it today with the soldiers who return from battle with scars of PTSD that will never truly heal. Men and women sacrifice their lives because somewhere in our country's threadbare we have held to the belief that war is the only way. Why don't we believe, having historical reflections like the *Iliad*, that we have a moral obligation to avoid the empty absurdity of war at all costs? Why can we acknowledge that the ideology behind *Iliad* is a myth, but continue to operate under an alarmingly similar, yet slightly rose-tinted, ideology? We don't need every 21st century American to read the *Iliad*, but we need them to understand that we as a society have been caught in the ideology of a fairytale. Reading the *Iliad* as a reflection of modern society forces the modern person to understand the absurdity of war. We undeniably have more knowledge of the world around us than those that lived in the time the *Iliad* was written. We've had the benefit of history to steer us in the right direction. So why, when we read an epic history, has nothing changed? We should be better. It may have been the Greeks duty to die in battle, but it is our duty, as a society that has read the fairytales and moved forward, to ensure that the brave men and women of our country don't have to.