

Christ Presbyterian Academy
English I and English I Honors
Summer Reading Assignment
Black Ships Before Troy by Rosemary Sutcliff

ABSTRACT:

No other epic poem offers readers a side-line glimpse of grand display of war like Homer's *The Iliad*. The Iliad is a war poem, cataloguing the magnificence of ships, the raging battles, both Greek and Trojan heroes, events, armor, and outcomes. *Black Ships Before Troy* is a thrilling and beautiful retelling of this story. Though written in prose, the language is still lyrical and poetic capturing the imagery of both man and god as the two often intersect and collide. Along with its examination of the pantheon of Greek gods, *Black Ships Before Troy*, like the original poem, invokes the heroic spirit of Greek antiquity.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Homer's life is hidden in a shroud of mystery. The blind poet who composed two of the greatest epic poems in world literature may have been born around 850 B. C. on the island of Chios in the Aegean Sea. Little is known about his personal life and experience. The content, ideals, and styles of his epic poems formed the basis of Greek education in the days of Socrates, Plato, Sophocles, and Aristotle and shaped the vault of Western world literature.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

The following questions should guide your reading and understanding of Homer's epic story. Focus on the questions for each part of the reading and on the first two days of class, be prepared to demonstrate that knowledge in oral and written assessments. Then answers to these questions must be typed.

1. Why does the story start where it starts? What information does the author give that foreshadows the trouble to come?
2. How are the gods represented, and how does the divine condition compare to the human? How influential are the gods on human action?
3. What are the conditions, which make the war both inevitable and unwinnable? What are the two sides fighting for? Is peace impossible? Why can't the Greeks just pack up and go home? Why can't the Trojans restore Helen, along with appropriate compensation?
4. Are there distinctions drawn between Greeks and Trojans? Does the author take sides in his representation of the heroes?
5. How are women represented, and what are the positions of women in the poem? See especially Helen and, and Andromache. Is there any psychological or symbolic linkage to be made between the actions and attitudes of the women and of the goddesses Thetis, Hera, Athena, Aphrodite?
6. Study Hector's meeting with Andromache and their child Astyanax. Note the contrast between Hector and Achilles, on the one hand, and Hector and Paris, on the other. Is Hector fighting for something different from the other heroes? What's the importance and the role of family in the heroic world?

7. Study the attitude and activity of Zeus. Is there any consistency or design to the actions of the king and father of gods?
8. What is Agamemnon's offer of recompense to Achilles, and how (and why) does Odysseus modify it? Why does Achilles refuse Agamemnon's offer? How does Homer shape your response to this critical rejection? What is your attitude toward Achilles at this point in the narrative?
9. Hera's seduction of Zeus provides a digression from the primary narrative of human warfare. What is the thematic or symbolic point of the digression?
10. Homer employs the same stallion simile to describe Hector (15. 313-18) as had earlier described Paris (6. 604-09); does the simile function differently or the same in the two contexts and in relation to the two characters?
11. Study closely Achilles's speech to Patroclus, and the arming of Patroclus. What is the nature and basis of their friendship and what is Achilles's state of mind at this point of action?
12. What is the effect of Patroclus dying the way he does, and why is Apollo so actively involved in it (16. 903 ff.)?
13. Why are so many willing to battle and die over Patroclus's corpse?
14. What is at stake for Achilles in Patroclus's death, and why does it change his mind?
15. Study the symbolism and the thematic function of the shield, which Hephaestus forges for Achilles.
16. What ironies frame Hector's death? Does he die a "heroic" death?
17. What is your final assessment of Achilles as "best of the Achaeans."

Overall Questions

1. Do the heroes of *Black Ships Before Troy* have distinctive personalities? Do they develop and change as characters? Discuss these questions by reference to one major character.
2. What place is there for women and / or family in the heroic culture of the story?
3. Discuss the motivations and significance of the gods in *Black Ships Before Troy*. You might find it interesting to track the activity and the significance of one major god (Zeus, Thetis, Apollo, Aphrodite, Athena, etc.) as a way of focusing your discussion.
4. Discuss the symbolism and significance of the shield of Achilles.