Epithets in the *Iliad*: A Psychoanalytical Approach

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Abstract:

Homer used epithets in order to demonstrate more qualitative attributes of the characters of the epic. Epithets provide a rhythmic approach, that works as a beautifier of a literary work while assisting readers to live on the major characters and plots of the piece. The hero of the *Iliad*, Achilles, is designated as 'swift-footed' and 'like to the gods' to illustrate his role in the Greek army. Homer used epithets for mortals and also for deities like, Athena is called 'the hope of the soldiers' while Thetis is known as the 'silver-footed'. Besides that, the slave girl of Achilles, also got titles, the 'fair-cheeked' and the 'fair-haired', in order to illustrate her beauty that caught the eyes of Achilles, who considers her as his better half. As literature is the reflection of society through the imagination of the laureate (psychology), thus the uniqueness of being a fast runner, and refraining from the war due to his withdrawal from Briseis, represent instances of id, ego, and super-ego (psychological aspects). Such elements are envisaged throughout the literary work. Therefore, the primary motive of the paper is to discuss the use of epithets in the *Iliad* through the lens of psychology. That is, each character, whether it is mortal or deity or demi-god, whatsoever, the instances of id, ego, and superego have been analyzed. To accomplish the prime objective of the paper, secondary sources like journals, Online articles, and other sources available over the Internet are being used. Besides that, as a primary source, the understandings of the authors are used.

Keywords: Epithets, Greek Mythology, The Iliad, Homer, Achilles and Agamemnon.

Introduction

The *Iliad* is a storehouse of epithets, where different characters have innumerable unique attributes. The epithets of the *Iliad* typically extol characters or highlight their distinguishing traits. According to Clark’s (25th August 2022) analysis, epithets in the epic are adjectives that notify a reader about a unique feature of a character. It is a way for the laureate Homer to hook the readers upon the traits of a character. Besides that, the use of epithets has also enhanced the poetic diction (Clark, 2022). If analyzed from the epic poems of Homer to the literary works (poetry) of Shakespeare, the use of epithets has shaped the imagination of readers for quite a long time (MasterClass, 2021). Upon deep scrutiny, such unique features can be analyzed from a psychological end. As literature, a discipline that intertwines with different fields like, history, philosophy, sociology, psychology, and so on, the concerned discipline...
(literature) uses language as a mode of exchanging emotions like culture (Aras, 2015). The emotions of the human race, which can be discovered in literary works are, the psychosocial state of mankind, i.e., whatever the man sees or imagines gets reflected in literature.

In *Pride and Prejudice*¹, the writer illustrated the undeniable connections between the heart (soul) and body, to put it in other words, the emotion of mankind is connected with the physical world (Ramanathan, 2018). Such emotions of the laureate’s work as a motivation for literary works. Thus, the study of the psychological approach in literary work is inevitable. In this paper, the theories that Sigmund Freud and Julian Jayne gave have been utilized. Therefore, the primary motive of the paper is to explore the epithets of different characters of the *Iliad* through the lens of psychoanalytical criticism.

**Materials and Methods**

The researchers had tried to harvest relevant information from both primary and secondary sources and this paper is qualitative in nature. As a primary source the epic, has been used and as a secondary source, different criticisms of other critics have been used. Basically, the available materials on the Internet have been used for the research. Besides that, as a primary source, the understanding of the authors has been utilized.

**Scope and Limitation of the Paper**

Only a few primary characters namely, Achilles, Hector, Thetis, Agamemnon, Athena, Ajax, and Briseis have been discussed here along with their special attributes (epithets) from the *Iliad*. Besides that, a commentary on the epithets from a psychological end in accordance with the authors’ point of view, has also been discussed, nothing outside of these can be extracted from the paper.

**Literature Review**

A theory of personality, which is composed of id, ego, and super-ego has been preached by Sigmund Freud (Vinney, 2019). These three ideas serve as an explanation of how the human mind works. The id, ego, and super-ego are indeed the key parts that make up the human psyche, in Freud's view. To some extent, the ego is cognizant or visible, as is the super-ego. The id remains dormant. They combine to form the personality. This psychological paradigm describes the id as a collection of uncoordinated instinctive tendencies, the ego as an ordered realistic component, and the super-ego as the judgmental and moralizing component (Snowden, 2005, p. 105-107). The id, ego, and super-ego are mental processes, not physical components of the brain. The id is referred to as 'the dark, unreachable portion of our psyche' and does not correlate exactly to the real structures of the sort that neurology deals with. It is brimming with instinctive energy, but it lacks structure and generates no communal will. Instead, it just works to satisfy innate demands while keeping the pleasure principle in mind (Freud, 1933). The next element is the ego, which itself is described as 'that part of the id which has been directly impacted by the outside world' (Freud, 1923, p.25).

In the end, the superego's objective is to regulate the desires of the id, particularly those events that are socially unacceptable, like immoral sex or hate. Also, it encourages the ego to move forward with idealistic goals rather than purely utilitarian ones and to shoot for absolute results (Mcleo, 2023). The two aspects that make the superego are the conscience and the ideal self. Via instilling sentiments of remorse, the conscience can penalize the ego. In this paper, there is an attempt to use the above psychoanalytical aspects to assess the epithets used by Homer in the *Iliad*. This can enlighten us to get a better idea about the psychological mindset of a few concerned characters. Besides that, a primary focus has been enlightened by taking the help of Julian Jayne’s concept of

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¹ A Novel, written by Jane Austen, published on 28th January 1813 by T. Egerton, Whitehall.
'Bicameral Mind', first published in the form of a book named, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* in 1976. Jayne was the very first psychologist, who coined the term, 'Bicameral Mind' (Contributors to Psychology Wiki, n.d.). A Stanford University, professor Ernest Hilgard claimed that the hypothesis of Jayne i.e., the bicameral mind theory is an alternating intellectual dilemma to a reader, but upon a detailed scrutiny the reader is bound to think twice about the possibility of the theory. Even though, the reader engages in adverse arguments, yet has to dive into matters that have never been explored, or, has to think from different contexts (Overview of Julian Jaynes's Theory of Consciousness and the Bicameral Mind- Julian Jaynes Society, n.d.). Details of this theory have been discussed in the later part of the paper.

**Epithets in The Iliad**

In this part of the paper, an analysis of the epithets that Homer used in the concerned epic has been critically evaluated. Ornamental epithets, which are labels that come after the names of heroes, gods, or objects, are a defining aspect of Homeric Greek. The job of a laureate is made much more convenient by having a list of pre-made phrases to choose from, based on the number of syllables left on the line, and the epithets are crafted in a way that fits the poetic meter, dactylic hexameter. Some have speculated that the epithets show that improvisation had a significant role in the creation of Greek oral poetry. A poet may improvise an epic on the spot, complete with audience participation, by drawing from a large pool of predetermined sections, including both brief phrases and entire mini-narratives. On the other hand, the epithets could have helped the actors of a staged epic better remember their lines. Homer's greatness as a poet stems less from his ability to come up with new metaphors and similes than from his ability to effectively use and arrange those that already existed.

In the *Iliad*, epithets are statements that describe a character’s trait or attribute. This is Homer’s approach to developing his characters further. The epithets add to the *Iliad*'s rhythm and poetry while providing insight into the characters (Gill, 2007). The *Iliad* provides a variety of examples of epithets, such as when Achilles is called ‘swift-foot’ for his quickness and agility and when Hector is called ‘man-killing’ for his ruthlessness on the battlefield. The epithets of a few characters from the epic, *Iliad* are given below.

**Epithets of Achilles**

**The Wrath of Achilles**

One of Achilles’ epithets is his wrath. He was overwhelmed with rage when his sense of honor, the gift (Briseis) was snatched by Agamemnon. This resulted in his withdrawal from the Trojan War (The Wrath of Achilles: Critical Analysis of the Iliad - Free Essay Example - Edubirdie, 2022). Then he sends his friend, Patroclus in his outfit (dressed as Achilles) to uplift the morals of the Greeks and create a terror in the opponent. But he (Patroclus) was killed and this death was on his hand. Both events paved the way for his wrath, which ultimately resulted in the murder of Hector and the mutation of his corpse. This act violated the basic norms of humanity. However, later on, he returns from demonic views by returning the corpse to Priam.

**Achilles, the Greatest Greek Warrior**

His presence usually raises the morale of the Greek army and on the other hand, gives birth to fear in the hearts of the opponent (Trojans). His skills with weapons ensure that he slays his enemies, even before they could realize it.

**Achilles, the Swift Feet**

The exact wording of the epithet depends on the translation. In books, the qualifying title of the Protagonist is simplified as 'Achilles of the swift feet' but the essence remains constant this man is very swift and agile on battlefields (Dunkle, 1997). From the study of Clarke (2019), it can be extracted that, another title of the protagonist is 'lion-hearted' which expresses the bravery and fearlessness of the Greek epic hero. His fearless mentality i.e., the courage of a lion within him, paved him a mental stronghold to face thousands and conquer them all (Clarke, 2019). His courage staged him against the most
powerful Trojan warrior, Hektor, whom he killed without breaking a sweat (Graziosi, 2019).

**Achilles’ god-like status (demigod)**

Another of this epic character's epithets is 'similar to the gods,' which refers to Achilles' god-like position (demigod). In Thessaly, he was the son of the nymph Thetis and Peleus, King of the Myrmidons. His mother sought to make him eternal by immersing him in the hellish river Styx, according to certain versions of the narrative. Except for the bit (his heel²) that his mother grasped when plunging him into the river, Achilles became invincible. According to Greek mythology, the protagonist of the *Iliad*, died due to the infliction of an arrow, thrown by Paris to his heel, the fragile part of this demigod, and from there the phrase 'Achilles' heel' has been extracted to express the weakness of man (Anagnostopoulou & Mavridis, 2013). His heel was the part that his mother failed to immerse in the river, Styx.

**Epithets of Hector: Hector, the man Killer**

According to research undertaken by Avi Kapach (2022), Hector is called 'man-killing' or 'man-killer,' depending on the language, and it reflects his ability to route the Greek troops (through the lens of the *Iliad*). As a 'man-killer', Hector assassinates many high Greek army officers, including Patroclus and Protesilaus, King of Phylake. This moniker, as the greatest Trojan warrior, inspires confidence and raises morale in the camp. He is also regarded as the 'horse tamer', not because of his skill to tame horses, but because of his ability to tame the wild Greeks. For his job as a leader and a defender of the Trojan army, Priam’s first-born son was known as the ‘shepherd of the people’. His ability to inspire the soldiers to wage attacks and counteroffensives is evidenced by his epithet, ‘lord marshal’. His accomplishments on the battlefield earned him the appellation, ‘strong’. This Greek army leader is also known as ‘clever’, most likely because of how he won the battle, and 'powerful,' because of his might and authority. Agamemnon was a Mycenaean king who led the Greeks during the Trojan War, according to Greek mythology. He was the son or grandchild of King Atreus and Queen Aerope, as well as Menelaus’s brother (Homer, *Iliad*, Book 9, line 114). But this character has some elements of reckless and self-serving ideology, yet, he cares about his dear ones and at the same time is vicious against his

**Epithets of Thetis: Thetis, the Silver Footed**

The Homeric epithet for the nymph and mother of Achilles is silver-footed and though the meaning is not clear, it is believed to indicate her shape-shifting ability. Some other sources indicate that as she can run very fast, and to define her attribute the term is used (Swift-footed definition and meaning|Collins English Dictionary, n.d.). The study conducted by Kapach in 2023 puts some light along with the epic itself, the *Iliad*, she is known to change shapes either to escape capture or to deceive her victims. When Peleus attempts to marry her, the nymph keeps eluding him until a friend advises him to hold her tightly. Peleus finally succeeds and their marriage is witnessed by all the deities. She also tried to save her son (Achilles) by making him immortal as she discovered that his death was imminent. But she failed. Before that, she also asked other gods to help her son win the war (Kapach, 2023). All of this represents nothing but a deceitful attribute, and the irony is that she is a goddess, and people assume that they bear high morality.

**Epithets of Agamemnon: Agamemnon, the Lord Marshal**

Agamemnon is the Greek field commander of the Achaean soldiers after Paris abducted Helen, Menelaus' wife (some might differ, as she went voluntarily). As a result, he is labeled as the 'shepherd of the people'. His ability to inspire the soldiers to wage attacks and counteroffensives is evidenced by his epithet, 'lord marshal'. His accomplishments on the battlefield earned him the appellation, 'strong'. This Greek army leader is also known as 'clever', most likely because of how he won the battle, and 'powerful,' because of his might and authority. Agamemnon was a Mycenaean king who led the Greeks during the Trojan War, according to Greek mythology. He was the son or grandchild of King Atreus and Queen Aerope, as well as Menelaus's brother (Homer, *Iliad*, Book 9, line 114). But this character has some elements of reckless and self-serving ideology, yet, he cares about his dear ones and at the same time is vicious against his

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² The back part of the human foot is behind the arch and below the ankle.
enemies. He also believes his troops but not blindly (Classics in Conversation, 2011).

**Epithets of Athena: Athena, the Hope of Soldiers**

Information about this character can be discovered in Clark's study, which came to light on January 1, 2022. Athena's epithets in the Odyssey appear to be comparable to hers in the Iliad. Athena, the goddess of battle, is known as the 'hope of soldiers' because she usually comes to the help of Greek fighters. She supports and counsels Achilles and deflects an arrow aimed at Menelaus, King of Sparta and Helen's husband. She is known as the 'tireless one', referring to her dedication to ensuring that the Greeks win the war. Additional epithets include bright eyes, which indicates her attentiveness in safeguarding the Greek army's monarchs and generals. Besides that, she is also known to be the 'daughter of Zeus' and 'whose shield is thunder', presumably to indicate her kinship with the gods' monarch. As the goddess of battle, she is likened to Pallas, the Titan deity of war-craft, and is hence known as 'Pallas' (Clark, 2022).

**Epithets of Ajax: Ajax, the Gigantic**

Mary B. Moore carried out a study on Ajax, the Greek warrior and cousin of Achilles, which was published in an article, back in 1980. This paper informs that Ajax is known as 'gigantic', which probably indicates his stature and the shield he wields. Homer also calls him 'swift' and 'mighty' and it is not surprising that the greatest warrior of Troy could not defeat the Telamonian Ajax. He is second to Achilles in terms of power and swiftness (Moore, 1980). No one can defeat him, and that is why he is tricked into committing suicide (The Iliad of Homer: The Single Combat of Hector and Ajax, n.d.).

**Epithet of Briseis: Briseis, the Fair Cheeked**

Marco Funtuzzi wrote a book in 2013, that has a chapter named 'Briseis' (chapter 3), where he discussed the chemistry between Achilles and her (B). She (B) is a slave girl and Achilles' war prize, who sees her as a testament to his victory on the battlefield. Homer refers to her as 'fair-cheeked' and 'fair-haired' to convey her beauty and grace. Her beauty draws the eye of her captor, who treats her as if she were a wife rather than a slave. As a result, when Agamemnon abducts Achilles' slave girl, the grief and dishonor become intolerable, causing him to abandon the fight (Funtuzzi, 2013).

**Psychological Criticism of the Epithets of the Characters**

Some psychological research has offered a new approach to the Iliad's god/human connections. Julian Jayne’s The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind takes a new approach to the god-human relationship (Jaynes, 1976/1977). Jaynes says modern consciousness is relatively recent and that earlier man had a bicameral mind, where one chamber spoke to the other when decisions or intentional action were needed. Jaynes sees the Iliad as pre-modern work. Athena is one side of Achilles' brain when she tells him not to slay Agamemnon. Jaynes' concept explains the voices early men heard in their heads by blaming the gods. This can coincide with the concept of id. Besides that, we can see that the overwhelming attribute of Achilles like his internal desire to destroy his opponent, is swift-footed (an inherent capability; id as it is latent) but at the moment such is reflected in the battlefield then we can call it ego. But when his ambition exceeds, this man dies although such is absent in the Iliad but another source says that by an arrow, this man died; which was thrown by Paris (Yinger, Mandelbaum, & Almekinders, 2002). Besides that, he also refused to fight for his king in an aggressive manner which resembles his superego. He also wants to be a perfect warrior and a role model for others, here it can be said, that his conscience (superego) encourages him to uplift the moral spirits of his team members. The prime theme of the epic, ‘Achilles Wrath’, if analyzed can be seen that when his honor has been violated, he withdrew from the war and when his friend was killed, he took revenge. The sense of honor was his id, his withdrawal and seclusion from society was his ego and ultimately the killing and mutation of the corpse resembles his superego.
The epithet of Briseis is the fair cheeked, the war gift that Agamemnon snatched and put the Greeks on the backfoot. The beauty of the lady made this great warrior treat her as a wife and upon losing her, he thought that he had lost his pride. Men are easily deviated by the beauty of women which may result in two huge crises, the drawback of the Greeks (Achilles not participating) and the death of Patroclus. This is the principle of the butterfly effect, i.e., a small change may result in greater events later (Tahmid, 2022). Besides that, ‘The Principle of Karma’ or ‘The Principle of Causality’ is also reflected here. One act leads to another, i.e., one action results in the occurrence of another (Ushenko, 1953, p. 85-101). Thus, when Achilles refrained from participating in the war as he lost Briseis, this led to the death of his friend and the hamartia of his side. Thus, the role of this lady is immense in the epic. Along with Achilles, Hector is also a great warrior. Hector is represented as an ideal warrior (in contrast to Achilles) and he is drawn as an ideal son, father, husband, and trustworthy friend (Who is a braver hero: Hector or Achilles?, 2017). Such represents his ego, whereas Achilles has a hubris which tells us that Hector is a contrasting character in respect of Achilles.

Then comes Thetis, the mother of Achilles, who tried her level best to save her son. Despite being a goddess, she got herself involved in the conflict of mortals and tried to carry out an undue favor towards her son. Such resembles nothing but human psychology. This makes us coin id, ego, and superego to this character. As she is a goddess, she might have the perspective that her son should win, such as id and when she calls for favors from other gods, we can call it ego. But from a prophecy, she learned that her son will die, so, she tried to make him immortal but failed. This act represents the superego as mortals are bound to die and it is against nature to transform a mortal into an immortal one.

After that, Agamemnon, the Lord Marshall is a very powerful man. But his selfish attitude in his heart resembles his id and when he doesn’t blindly trust his troops, resembles his ego. It has been already exposed that, deep in his veins he is selfish, and this compels him to name this attribute as super-ego. Thus, this character is pretty contrary to Achilles and as a result, readers don’t develop the same feelings towards Agamemnon and Achilles.

Now let us try to point out the psychological views of the goddess of war, Athena. She is also known as the daughter of Zeus. Besides that, it can be seen that she counsels Achilles as an advisor, despite of being a goddess. Thus, this tells us that she wants Achilles to win, even though she is a goddess. This resembles her superego and deep in her mind she holds a rage against the Trojans, which represents her ego. Last but not least, she tried to implement her id by taking steps (helping Achilles), this is ego. The moral ground that allowed her to participate in the war of the mortals is the super-ego.

The last character of the paper is Ajax, the Gigantic, his special qualities are pretty similar to Achilles, basically in second place (in terms of position). Thus, we can find a pretty similar psychological analysis of his character. His id, ego, and superego all of the psychological attributes are in coincidence with Achilles. So, it can be rightly said that the unique specialties of different characters are well ornamented by Home in the epic, Iliad.

Conclusion

This study has discussed the role of epithets in the Iliad and has illustrated some instances of epithets, that the writer has put forward to express some unique attributes of his major characters. That is, the unique specialties of the primary characters are being focused on here. It is believed that after reading the paper one can have a brief idea about the unique attributes of different characters. 
Homeric epithets. Starting from the swift foot of Achilles to fair cheeked, Briseis, the play of epithets is evident in the study. Besides that, the id, ego, and superego of the characters in accordance with the concept of Freud has been discussed. The irony is that, the goddesses are also subject to id, ego, and superego, just like the mortals. It can be seen that some good attributes like swiftness footed, the bravery of the warriors along with some negative attributes like the wrath of Achilles and many more, got engraved in the paper. Epithets are still in use today as many prominent people have either adopted or are given specific names and titles by their admirers.

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Conflict of Interests

No conflict of interest.

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