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Hector: A Virtuous Hero or a Vulnerable Leader?

In the heroic and triumphant yet gory and extravagant epic poem, *Iliad*, Homer incorporates the seemingly contradictory yet interrelated themes of the desirable virtue and the inevitable vulnerability through the portrayal of various characters, especially the exemplary Trojan hero, Hector. Virtue, or “areté,” characterizes moral excellence or righteousness, while vulnerability indicates a susceptibility to mental or physical suffering. While Hector’s unwavering mentality cultivates his virtuosity and his moderately impractical decision-making contributes to his vulnerability, it is the combination of both that accurately depicts his personality and illustrates how these two paradoxical characteristics coexist.

Hector epitomizes excellence in all forms—physically, mentally, and morally. Hector describes himself as “Troy’s best,” and is regularly praised for his commanding physical proficiency, but it is his moral ideals that truly make him virtuous (16.875). In the *Iliad*, excellence differs for each individual. For example, Diomedes and the Ajaxes are magnificent warriors, Odysseus is a skillful strategist, Nestor is an ideal advisor, and Patroclus is an exemplary friend. All of them demonstrate excellence in their own manner. Similarly, Hector derives his excellence through his patriotism and morally upright motivation. In fact, he reflects that only “One omen is best: to fight for [one’s] country” (12. 250). This truly reflects Hector’s internal motivation. Although he knows that the Trojans’ destruction is inevitable, he still comprehensively commits himself to their objective. Furthermore, the emotional conversation that takes place between Hector and his wife, Andromache, just before he bids farewell,

adequately illuminates Hector's priorities. Although he realizes the suffering that will result from the intolerable post-war treatment of Andromache and their emotional separation would be much more agonizing than the loss of the Trojan kingdom, he still decides to fight for Troy. He does not desire to shame his family name, be remembered as a coward, or disappoint his army as he is essential to Troy's success (6. 463-495). The sense of responsibility obliges Hector to take a personally arduous decision, but consequently, he becomes a resolute leader for the Trojans. In addition, although he did not necessarily agree with the war's cause and even criticizes his own brother, Paris, for being "nothing but trouble for [his] father and [his] city," Hector still fights for Troy because of his utmost sense of duty (3. 55). Patriotism, sacrifice, and duty thoroughly demonstrate Hector's sense of moral righteousness. On the other hand, Paris is the ideal representation of self-centeredness, while the troublesome Agamemnon is the model for arrogance. Both of these characters are marked by non-virtuous personalities, as are several other minor characters. Altogether, Hector is an ideal personification of a righteous individual as he carries a steadfast attitude instead of one marked by personal pleasure and excessive pride as shown by most other figures in the *Iliad*.

Regardless of Hector's insurmountable achievements and noble demeanor, he unfortunately also possesses several flaws, which eventually contribute to his inevitable downfall. While Hector's patriotic speech is regarded as a moral virtue, his corresponding actions symbolize weakness. He ignored the advice of the thoughtful Polydamas, stubbornly insisted on invading the Greeks, and implemented reckless decisions. His overconfidence amplified his ego, which made him shortsighted of the complete scenario and eventually caused the Trojans an irreparable catastrophe (12. 239-273). As a leader, his impulsive decisions were one of his most profound weaknesses. He repeats these reckless mistakes, which ultimately

triggers the Trojans' defeat. Furthermore, on a few occasions, he succumbs to his ego, which reflects some Hector's immoral moments. The usually ethical Hector turns into a monster against Patroclus. After receiving Apollo's unfair assistance to defeat Patroclus, Hector attempts to ridicule Patroclus' dead body after snatching his armor (16. 841-904). This moment is one of the Hector's lowest points in terms of behavioral conduct, which reveals his internal vulnerability. His vulnerability is completely exposed as he pleads to Achilles, "I'm not running any more, Achilles. / Three times around the city was enough" (22. 277-278). Furthermore, he begs to have his body honored if he loses, unlike how he treated Patroclus. This displays his selfish and double minded thinking. His attempt to form a mutual pact for his last rites is rightfully ignored by the infuriated Achilles. As Hector approaches death, he encounters his breaking point as he becomes tangibly vulnerable. He eventually decides against fleeing and gives Achilles a fight, but this moment still illustrates that even the godlike Hector possesses bouts of imperfection. As a whole, Hector, an epitome of heroic beauty and virtue, fails to be completely flawless.

Although Hector eventually turns out to be vulnerable, he still creates a positive aura and is a very likeable personality. This leads to the question: How can the two completely contradictory concepts of virtue and vulnerability belong together? In Hector's case, he needed both of these characteristics to make him who he truly was. He could not have achieved his greatness without his strong mental and physical capability, but his strengths generated overconfidence and mild arrogance which lead to his downfall. No single individual is perfect. Even the demigod, Achilles, was physically vulnerable due to his well-known "Achilles' heels." Hector characterizes a dilemma that several individuals suffer—the seemingly unlimited strength eventually turns out to become the colossal weakness. The *Iliad* concludes with Hector's death

rather than Achilles' death or the end of the war. This portrays the importance Hector carried throughout the poem. Even though he was defeated and possessed several flaws, he was virtuous enough to be given the importance of the entirety of the epic. The famed Achilles, who was another excellent character, was not considered important enough to define the *Iliad* itself. While Achilles fought for self-glory and honor, Hector fought for the people of Troy, which was deemed more significant by Homer. In his other works like the *Odyssey*, Homer explores the intermingling ideas of virtuosity and vulnerability through Odysseus. Although Odysseus is characterized as a cunning individual, he also possesses several flaws like making selfish and hasty decisions that harm himself and his crew in the long run, similar to Hector. The poet elucidates his ideas larger thematic opinions in his epics mainly through these major characters. All in all, Homer concedes that although every individual personifies moments of impeccable glory, he or she also embodies assailable moments which are needed to be overcome—essentially meaning that the combination of virtue and vulnerability is inevitable.

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