Achilles Respect For Authority Essay, Research Paper

Respect for authority plays an important role in The Iliad. Achilles is a major character in it whose views on authority change throughout the book. In Book One, he seems to have no respect for King Agamemnon. Achilles questions his judgment as well as rebelling against his authority. This is shown best when Achilles says, “What a worthless, burnt-out coward I’d be called if I would submit to you and all your orders.” (Pg. 87 line 43-45). This is an outright lack of respect directed toward Agamemnon. By Book Twenty-four however, his views seem to have changed. Achilles talks to King Priam of Troy with respect. An example in Book twenty-four is when Achilles and King Priam weep together over their losses.

Book One portrays Achilles as an individualist. This was the accepted way of life in the Bronze Age, which is when Achilles lived. The people who lived in Greece during that era were very selfish and self-centered. Achilles is not the only character in The Iliad who acts this way. Agamemnon, king of the Greeks, is also a very selfish character in this epic poem. The conflicts between these two major characters have catastrophic results. Because Agamemnon doesn’t want to give up Chryseis, his war-prize, Apollo cast a plague on the Greeks. Achilles goes to Agamemnon and asks him to return the girl to her father so the plague will end. He agrees to return her, but he doesn’t want to be left empty-handed. He returns Chryseis to her home, and he takes Briseis, a war-prize of Achilles. Achilles is so angry with Agamemnon that he vows to stop helping him fight the Trojans.

As the battle goes on, Agamemnon realizes how important Achilles and his Myrmidons are to the Achaean troops. The King of the Greeks then swallows his pride and offers gifts to Achilles if he will come back and help fight. Achilles, however, is so stubborn that he refuses all the gifts and will not allow his troops to fight. When he is offered the gifts he rudely responds, “I hate the man [Agamemnon] like the very gates of death who says one thing but hides another in his heart.”(Pg. 262 lines 378-379) This quote shows how much Achilles is hurt by what Agamemnon has done. When Odysseus leaves Achilles’ tent, Achilles best friend Patroclus persuades Achilles to lend him his armor so the Trojans will think it is Achilles and they will run away. This event ends with the death of Patroclus. Achilles then realized that he lost his friend because he had refused Agamemnon’s gifts and chose not to fight. The death of his friend is also a result his lack of respect for the kings authority. If he had done what Agamemnon said, none of this would have taken place. Achilles notices this, and in Book Twenty-four, he has changed.

After Achilles rejoins the battle and avenges his friend’s death by killing Hector, he tries to destroy the body by dragging it behind his chariot. Zeus notices this and protects the body from deterioration and physical destruction. He then sends Thetis, Achilles’ mother, down to tell the warrior to return the body to King Priam. He honors the wishes of his mother as well as the Gods. This is one type of respect he shows, but he also shows respect to King Priam when he comes to retrieve his son’s corpse. After talking to King Priam, Achilles develops a bond with Priam and sees the King as a father figure. With this new love for King Priam, Achilles agrees to help him as much as he can. He grants Priam a truce for twelve days so the Trojans can bury Hector, Achilles gives King Priam a place to sleep for the night, and he has Hectors body washed. His respect for the King can be shown when Achilles says, “All will be done, old Priam, as you command.” (Pg. 610 line 786). Achilles seems to have changed his ways on dealing with authority figures.

Books One and Twenty-four portray Achilles as a different person. Book one shows him as a selfish person who doesn’t care about anyone else as long as he gets what he wants. When he doesn’t get it, he acts like a child and complains. In the later books of the poem, Achilles has changed a great deal. He starts to think of others and their feelings. He changes from being selfish to having a selfless attitude. These new traits that Achilles possesses are the same ones that Hector lived with. Hector was a very selfless person who lived with Iron Age values and constantly thought of others and respected authority figures.

Throughout the poem, Achilles actions have made him reflect on what he could do better. Showing respect to those who have earned it is probably the most important lesson that he has learned. His actions in Book One affect not only his life but also the life of his friend and the lives of other Greek soldiers. Toward the end of The Iliad, Achilles understands that all these effects derive from one episode of selfishness that took place in Book One with Agamemnon. This one occasion has a ripple effect on the lives of the Greeks. Achilles understands this, and changes his ways to avoid other conflicts with humans as well as with the Gods.