The Iliad Book 1 Summary

- The poet prays to the Muse, the goddess of poetic inspiration. He wants her to tell him about the rage of Achilleus, and how it hurt the Achaians. He asks her to begin with the fight between Achilleus and Agamemnon.
- Confused yet? Don't worry. You're supposed to be. What you've just experienced is one of every epic poet's favorite tricks: beginning the story *in medias res* or "in the middle of things." (*In medias res* is known to cause dizziness and loss of appetite for stories with less awesome openers. You can learn more about it and Homer's other poetic stylings in "Writing Style.")
- Still, to be fair, Homer's Ancient Greek audience would have known a lot of background info that you might not, so let's take a moment to bring you up to speed. In other words, we hope you brought your rain jacket – because we're about to take a Journey Through The Mists Of Time!
- Did we say Ancient Greek? We did. But you're not going to hear it all that often. That's because, even though the *Iliad* is over 2,000 years old, the story it tells is even older. Way back in the Bronze Age, when the *Iliad* takes place, people went by the names of dominant tribes or regions. The most general of these names are Achaians, Danaans, and Argives. To keep things simple, in these summaries we're going to stick to the name Achaians, but the others will turn up in your reading. With these three names, all you have to remember is that they all mean Greeks.
- Misty enough for you? Don't worry, it'll get clearer. Right now, though, you're probably still wondering about those other names heard earlier – Achilleus and Agamemnon. Who are they?
- For the moment, all you really need to know is that Agamemnon is the most powerful king of the Achaians, and Achilleus is his best warrior. (More detailed information can be found in our section on "Characters.") Both of them are part of the Achaian army that is making war against Troy, a city in modern Turkey.
- To understand what this war is all about, you'll have to get filled in on – are you ready for this? – The Backstory.
- Like many a Backstory, this one has to do with a Boy and a Girl. You know: Boy meets Girl, Boy falls in love with Girl, Boy and Girl run off together. Simple, right?
- Sort of, except in this case there were complications. (There are always complications.) Here's how it all went down:
- First of all, the Boy was none other than Paris, Prince of Troy. As for the Girl, whose name was Helen, she just happened to be the most beautiful woman in the world. And she was married to Menelaos, the King of Sparta, who didn't take too kindly to her running off with your standard-issue Trojan heartthrob.
- To get his wife back, Menelaos turned to his brother, Agamemnon. Agamemnon raised an army and set sail for Troy. Unfortunately, things didn't go as planned. Instead of being greeted as liberators, Agamemnon's army encountered stiff resistance and were forced to settle in for a long siege.
- That was all nine years before our story begins. The *Iliad* starts in the tenth year of the war.
• The point is, now that you know what the "things" are, it's high time we jumped "into the middle of" them!
• The first scene of the *Iliad* finds Chryses, the priest of Apollo (god of the sun and a whole lot of other stuff), approaching to Achaian camp to ask for his daughter back. Shortly afterward, we learn that his daughter is being held captive by Agamemnon, who wants to keep her as his personal possession.
• Ask and ye shall receive, right? Well, sometimes things aren't that simple. Even though the other Achaians say, "Let her go," Agamemnon says, "No way, José." Chryses leaves disappointed.
• The thing is, being a priest of Apollo, Chryses has another trick up his sleeve – that is, er, robe. He prays to the god to punish the Achaians.
• Apollo is only too happy to oblige. He comes down from Olympos and shoots at the Achaians with his bow. The arrows from his bow cause disease. The plague rages for nine days.
• Understandably annoyed, Achilles calls a meeting on the tenth day. He tells the Achaians that they should either sail home immediately, or get advice from a soothsayer on what to do instead.
• On cue, the soothsayer Kalchas stands up, but he's afraid to speak his mind in case he angers the powers that be. Achilles says, "I've got your back." With that reassurance, Kalchas reveals that the plague was caused by Apollo, who was avenging the kidnapping of his priest's daughter. Kalchas tells Agamemnon that he has to give the girl back.
• The powers that be are now officially angry. Agamemnon starts by cursing out Kalchas. Once that's off his chest he says he'll give up Chryseis – this is the girl's name, which is kind of confusing – but only if he gets something equal in return. Otherwise he'll be dishonored.
• Achilles says, "Tough luck. You'll get your payback when we sack Troy. You can't take what's already been given to somebody else."
• Agamemnon says there's no way he's giving up Chryseis without taking one of the other chieftains' women.
• That's all it takes to make Achilles furious. He threatens to quit the Achaian army altogether and go home. He says that the Trojans never did anything to him. If he's attacking Troy, it's only because Agamemnon asked him to, so the leader of the Achaians had better show him some respect.
• But the leader of the Achaians doesn't appreciate challenges to his authority. He says that he will only give up Chryseis if he can take Achilles's girl, Briseis.
• Now Achilles snaps. Or, almost. He is just wondering whether he should kill Agamemnon, when the goddess Athene comes down from Olympos, invisible to everyone except him.
• Athene tells Achilles that she was sent by the goddess Hera, who loves both men equally, and doesn't want either of them to get hurt. She says that, in the future, Achilles will get paid back thrice over for whatever he suffers now. For the moment, though, he must immediately cease and desist. Achilles puts his sword back in its scabbard.
• Frustrated that he can't kill Agamemnon, Achilles unleashes a merciless flow of disses against him. Achilles tells Agamemnon that he's had it, he quits. He lets
everyone know they'll be sorry they insulted him when they are suffering at the hands of Hektor – the best of the Trojan warriors.

- At this point, Nestor, the resident old-timer in the Achaian army, stands up and makes a long, rambling speech about how he's the resident old-timer, and how everybody had thicker skin in the old days. Having thus established his street-cred, Nestor tells Agamemnon not to take Achilleus's girl Briseis. Then he tells Achilleus not to stand up to a king.
- But they don't listen. Agamemnon starts whining about how Achilleus doesn't respect his authority. Achilleus says that Agamemnon deserved everything he got. He says that he will give up Briseis without a fight, but if anybody tries to touch the rest of his stuff, it's curtains.
- It also happens to be curtains for the meeting, and everyone disperses. Achilleus goes back to his own ship to hang out with his best friend Patroklos.
- When heralds come from Agamemnon to take Briseis away, Achilleus tells them his quarrel isn't with them. He lets her go. She goes unwillingly.
- Now Achilleus sits down on the shore and starts crying. He prays to his mother, Thetis, a sea-goddess, to come help him out.
- She hears him and comes out of the sea. Achilleus tells her what happened, and asks her to put in a request with Zeus, the king of the gods. He wants her to get Zeus to help the Trojans drive the Achaians back against their ships, so that they'll know how much better off they were with Achilleus on their side.
- Thetis laments because she knows a prophecy that this will set off a chain of events that will make the rest of Achilleus's brief life miserable. All the same, she says that she will speak to Zeus – as soon as the gods get back to Olympos from their twelve-day party with the Aethiopians.
- In the meantime, Agamemnon sends Chryseis off on a ship to be returned to her father. He puts Odysseus in charge of this expedition.
- Twelve days later, the gods get back to Olympos, and Thetis goes to see Zeus. She finds him sitting alone on the highest mountain peak. She reminds him how she once helped him out when the other gods tied him up. Even though Zeus is reluctant – he reminds Thetis how his wife Hera is always nagging him about helping out the Trojans – he agrees to Thetis's request.
- As he predicted, as soon as Zeus walks out among the other gods, Hera starts nagging him. Zeus tells her to be quiet. Hephaistos, the blacksmith god, and the son of Zeus and Hera, tells his mother to make her peace with Zeus.
- Once things are settled, the gods have a feast. Hephaistos bustles about, serving them. The gods laugh at him because he walks with a limp, and because the Olympian gods are never politically correct.