**Background on *The Iliad***

**The Text**

* Greek written text developed from earlier oral version(s)
  + written text shows evidence of oral-formulaic composition, including
    - repetition of large portions of action or description to help the audience follow the plot and remember events that occur earlier in the poem,
    - [epithets](http://www.public.iastate.edu/~gbetcher/353/wordstk.htm#anchor1387747) applied to characters, places, or things to fill out the meter of lines (e.g., Athena is "the grey-eyed goddess"[ln 242] or Hera is identified as "snowy-armed"[ln 659])
* supposedly composed by Homer, who most critics now agree was
  + a single individual who lived ca. 8th c. BCE,
  + a professional teller of tales, like a bard or a minstrel,
  + a native of Ionia in Asia minor, and
  + blind, according to tradition.
* written in epic meter, dactylic hexameter--lines with six metrical feet (groups of syllables) of dactyls (one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables)
* events described seem to predate the composition by about 400 years
  + Archaeological evidence shows that around the early 12th c. Troy was involved in a war like that depicted in *The Iliad*.

**Plot, Setting, and Themes**

The tragic plot focuses on

* one short episode in the Trojan War, which went on for 10 years; and on
* describing the heroic world.

The poem is set

* in and around Troy, especially in the army encampments and at the seaside, during the war with Greece, though
* the scene occasionally changes to Olympus, the home of the gods.

The basic themes of *The Iliad* are

* heroism, especially heroism that comes from facing death and dying for a noble cause, and
* the relationship between humans and the gods.
  + The gods influence the lives of humans and intervene in the course of events, yet humans are responsible for their own actions and the repercussions of those actions.
  + The gods are more powerful than the humans, yet they cannot grant the humans eternal life.
  + The gods are exempt from human suffering and death, yet they must suffer the bickering and backbiting of their fellow deities and be aware of the loyalties and rivalries in their divine world if they want to avoid the wrath of other deities. In many ways, their world seems like a parody of the human world.

**The Heroic Code in *The Iliad***

**Heroic Honor**

The goal of Homeric heroes is to achieve honor. Honor is essential if one wants to be a hero

* Honor is gained through engagement in life-threatening activities (a hero cannot avoid threatening situations and maintain his honor).
  + Other characters often advise heroes to stay away from certain situations (Akhilleus warns Patroklos not to attack Troy; Poulydamas tells Hektor to lead the Trojans back to the city and fight with them there; Priam and Hekabe beg Hektor not to fight Akhilleus), but to be heroic, heroes must ignore the advice.
* Heroes value honor above life.
  + Hektor contemplates his options (Bk 22, lns 119-56--to take cover within the walls and suffer Poulydamas' censure for not having done so immediately; to kill Akhilleus in combat, man to man; or to shed his armor, approach Akhilleus, and talk things out by offering to return Helen along with Alexandros' spoils) but determines that he has no choice: to maintain his honor and gain the respect of Akhilleus, he must fight and leave his fate in the hands of the gods.
* Honor is determined by a number of things:
  + the courage he displays,
  + the difficulty of the test he faces (battle brings the highest honor while hunting and athletics garner lesser degrees of honor, and offering sage advice in council--as the aged Nestor does--brings even less honor),
  + the physical abilities he possesses,
  + his social status, and
  + the possessions that he acquires, i.e., the spoils of his victories.

**Heroism as Depicted in *The Iliad***

Heroism drives the action of the poem.

* The competition between Greek and Trojan heroes introduces life-and-death situations in which one must kill or be killed.
  + While mercy and pity seem to be valued in the world of the poem, heroes do not show mercy to their living opponents; they are merciless. Mercy and pity seem to be reserved for the aftermath of confrontation battle, shown to the survivors or the honored dead.
  + The triumph in battle is marked by the taking of the dead, defeated warrior's armor as a prize, or by the taking of other valued spoils such as Briseis or Chryseis.
* Family and individual honor must be maintained despite the need to fight for the cause of one's homeland.
  + If these two forms of honor--personal and patriotic--conflict with each other, personal honor comes first to the Homeric hero.
* Since only one's comrades can bestow honor, concern for one's reputation and fame often leads heroes to act in courageous (unwise?) ways, no matter what advice they are given.

Text from: <http://www.public.iastate.edu/~gbetcher/353/ilback.htm>