The Hubris of Self Knowledge in *The Iliad* & *The Tales of Hoffman*

“I have great faith in fools – self-confidence my friends call it” – Oscar Wilde

In both *The Iliad* and *The Tales of Hoffman*, a key distinction between characters is whether or not they possess the ability to accurately perceive themselves and the world around them. Both works feature two sets of characters: those who possess omniscience, the deities in *The Iliad* and the Devil and the Muse in *The Tales of Hoffman*, and those who do not, the tragic heroes. Relative to the immortals, whose divinity affords them a privileged omniscient perspective, the latter protagonists have a much lower level of cognizance so the focus is, as it should be, on their self-awareness. By establishing a direct causal relationship between heroes’ self-perception and their actions, *The Iliad* and *The Tales of Hoffman* reveal that mistaken self-knowledge results in heroes’ development of hubris, which precipitates their ultimate downfall.

In the initial stages of *The Iliad*, Hector is presented as the idealized warrior, a pious, rational man who fights with honor for his country. Yet as the epic progresses, an evident shift occurs in Hector’s mentality. In his concern to avoid “falling into the hands of his foes as men caught in the meshes of a net” (Iliad V, 485), Hector unconsciously withdraws into himself. As he does this, his actions become increasingly governed by his own personal conclusions, which are drawn from his confidence in his own judgment and invincibility. Most importantly though, he begins to act in sharp opposition to those who possess a larger degree of omniscience than himself: seers who represent the collective
wisdom of the Trojan demos. This dangerous upending of his personality occurs gradually and is first noticed by the most analytical and perceptive of the Danaans, Odysseus. In his pragmatic and skeptical approach to matters both personal and political, Odysseus acknowledges both the existence and fickleness of higher powers: “Zeus, moreover, has sent his signals [sema]” (Iliad IX, 235). It is notable that this statement precedes his criticism of Hector for “raging like a madman in all his glory” (Iliad IX, 236). Though Hector is unaware of Odysseus’ censure, its implications are enormous. Odysseus has already had to reap the consequences of arrogant mindsets: when Agamemnon’s derangement [ate] causes Achilles to refrain from battle, Odysseus has to cope with the ensuing military disarray and misfortune. Thus, Odysseus’ experiences allow him to provide a lucid and balanced evaluation of Hector. His speech establishes a parallel between the derangement [ate] of Agamemnon, which resulted in the alienation of his choice warrior, and the “wolfish rage [lyssa]” of Hector, which fatally clouds his judgment and eventually results in a comparable military disaster for the Trojans (Iliad IX, 237). It is also one of first times Homer foreshadows Hector’s death: the mention of sema, which means both “signs” and “tombs,” implies that Hector’s new arrogant mentality makes him disregard key signs and brings him closer to his own demise. Since the signs are clearly visible to observant mortals like Odysseus, it is clear that Hector bears a great deal of responsibility for his own fate.

It would be impractical to expect introspection and rationale from a warrior in the midst of battle, when all a warrior cares about is victory. Rather, Hector’s loss of self-knowledge and consequent development of hubris should be evaluated prior to his entrance into combat. At the meeting of the Trojan demos, Polydamas expresses his disapproval
that Hector rebukes anyone who “crosses his will” and that he expects others to “support him always” (Iliad XII, 210-215). As a seer, Polydamas is capable of refraining from empty idealization and the development of a sense of false comfort. His critique of Hector emphasizes the latter’s utter inability to do the same. Hector foolishly assumes that “there is one omen, and one only – that a man should fight for his country” (Iliad XII, 240) and so makes the conscious choice to abandon self-doubt, a key component of perspective. Moreover, he isolates himself by weighting his own judgment over that of others in the demos. As Michael Naas argues in *Turning: From Persuasion to Philosophy*, “those who have hubris are transgressive and excessive not because they go beyond the limits normally assigned to individuals but because they see themselves as individuals who are no longer essentially linked to others” (*Persuasion and Hubris, I13*). Thus, Hector’s vulnerability is directly linked to his arrogant self-confidence, which isolates him and leaves him at the mercy of his fate. Hector is forewarned by Apollo that fighting Achilles in single combat will be a fatal move (Iliad XX, 375), but his disregard of the sema Polydamas mentions leaves him no choice but to do exactly that. Before entering battle, Hector instinctually perceives the fatal ramifications of his own hubris: “I would not listen, but it would have been indeed better if I had done so. Now that my folly has destroyed the host of warriors, I dare not look Trojan men and Trojan women in the face, lest a worse man should say, ‘Hector has ruined us by his self confidence’” (Iliad XXII, 101-106). Hector’s statement indicates a newly found self-cognition that allows him to see that he has been the agent of his own destruction.

The theme of hubris and its role in hastening a hero’s demise is one of the first motifs the viewer is introduced to in *The Tales of Hoffman*. The tragic hero of Hoffman’s
story is Kleinzach, who we, as the omniscient viewers, can see is gambling with his own self-preservation in his obsessive idealization and pursuit of his lady love. The lady is fortunate enough to wield a mirror, which is crucial because it allows her to attain the closest thing to our privileged omniscience – a conception of herself. She has the certainty of knowing that she is gorgeous, and therefore has realistic expectations of herself and of others. But Kleinzach possesses no such mirror and so moves blindly forward in his pursuit of her, completely unaware of his grotesqueness and the impediments it causes. Kleinzach’s actions, which include his eager manner of fawning over the lady, show that he possesses a false inner peace and a tragic ignorance. The dramatic irony of the film rests in that only we as observers see that Kleinzach’s pride and confidence are misplaced and that he remains vulnerable to chance. The opening shots of the film give the viewer a look at the unpredictable setting: the camera shifts very quickly from one image to the next and the weather vanes continually change direction. This setting is the perfect backdrop for Hoffman’s story because it provides a contrast to the caricatured characters representing archetypal human vices and delusions, the foremost of which is Kleinzach. At the decisive moment in the narrative, Kleinzach is dealt a bitter blow of disillusionment – for a split second, he chances to see his own reflection in the mirror of his fair lady. At that moment, he instantly loses his confidence and his pride because he realizes that his true situation prevents him from ever realizing his lofty and misguided ambitions. When Kleinzach’s hubris and empty idealism are revealed to him, the truth “resounds through his heart,” and he dies. Kleinzach is a tragic hero because his attainment of true self-cognizance leads directly to his death.
Homer and Powell both establish the lack of self-perception as key to both Hector’s and Kleinzach’s tragic end. Both protagonists suffer because they are blinded by their own deluded convictions and lack the self-knowledge needed to be successful in their pursuits. But the most important similarity between the characters is their pivotal function in the larger work. Hector in *The Iliad* and Kleinzach in *The Tales of Hoffman* are used to create a sense of parallelism and continuity because the manner of their demise foreshadows, respectively, the doom of Achilles and Hoffman. Moreover, their inclusion allows Homer and Powell to inject a critical tone into their works. For while the hubris of Hector and Kleinzach are somewhat excusable, seeing as they are unaware of their fate, the hubris of Achilles and Hoffman is not, and is therefore presented as an even more of a tragic flaw. Unlike Hector, Achilles knows the prophecy about his death and unlike Kleinzach, Hoffman has both the external counsel of the Muse and the opportunity to learn from his former amorous failures. Compared to Hector and Kleinzach, Achilles and Hoffman have a higher level of self-perception but generally speaking, all four protagonists suffer from varying degrees of flawed self-knowledge. Their composite lack of insight and their empty idealism in regard to complex matters upon which their very lives depend makes them all the tragic victims of their own derangement [ate] and false pride.

**Work Cited**

Naas, Michael. *Turning: From Persuasion to Philosophy: A Reading of Homer’s Iliad.*