

THE MECHANICS OF MYTH: A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE *ILIAD*'S FIRST BOOK

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Abstract: This article utilizes structural and semiotic analysis of the first book of the *Iliad*, primarily employing the analytical methodology of A.J. Greimas and Roland Barthes. The narrative is recognized as a self-regulating mechanism where human choice acts as a functional illusion. The relationship between the physical form of the epic and its underlying concepts is the main mechanism through which meaning is determined. The clash between Achilles and Agamemnon is viewed as a total value-crash within a Mediocristan baseline, a term for a stable and predictable setting. This social breakdown forces high-impact Extremistan shocks, which are defined as unpredictable and volatile events. Within the plot, such shocks are delivered by the divine powers, the Olympian pantheon. This study demonstrates that divine communication operates as a regulatory mechanism. Whenever the terrestrial order breaks down, the gods intervene to regulate the system. Instead of being decorative, divine actions directly control the narrative flow.

Keywords: Actantial Model; Extremistan; Mediocristan; Semiotic/Structural Analysis; The *Iliad*

1. Introduction

The *Iliad* is an ancient Greek epic that narrates the Trojan War and the heavy costs of heroic rage. Within the broader narrative, the abduction of Helen is indicated to be an act of taking by force. This event is labeled as “negative reciprocity” by Cook (2016) as value is seized without fair compensation. Following Helen’s abduction, the Greek social network started to a military revenge as an endeavor for compensation. By this way, the equilibrium could be restored. The military campaign against Achaean forces has been sustained for a decade which results in the siege of Troy. The entire poem covers a decade long war but interestingly the timespan of the *Iliad* is only a few weeks. In this period, the analytical focus is directed toward the internal systemic resistance within the first book of *Iliad*.

The Black Swan theory, founded by Nassim Nicholas Taleb, is a framework where highly improbable events bring about massive impacts on the systems. In the

2007 book, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, he combines philosophy with this framework to gain understanding of such occurrences. The "Black Swan" is defined by Taleb (2008) as an unpredictable exception that challenges existing knowledge models.

Taleb uses the depiction of a farm turkey as his popular example where a turkey gets fed consistently for a thousand days which creates a false sense of permanent safety for the animal. This predictable routine is eventually ruined by a single, unexpected event right before Thanksgiving (Taleb, 2008, p. 40). By borrowing Taleb's terminology, *Mediocristan* and *Extremistan*, it is aimed at this study to evaluate the extreme deviations within the narrative.

A stable foundation is maintained through formulaic language and the balanced exchange of prizes (*gera*), recognized as the *Mediocristan* baseline. Taleb (2008) claims that it represents predictable and stable order. For *Iliad*, this order is the human network that is maintained by the systemic balance. *Extremistan* is defined by unpredictable outliers which deliver massive impacts to the system (Taleb, 2008). This is a highly volatile domain which is driven by the divine forces of Olympian gods. In brief, volatility is defined as the capacity for high-impact anomalies to break the boundaries of a stable system.

In Book 1, the narrative sequence begins with a ransom for a captured daughter that Agamemnon refuses. This act defies the rules-based agreement of mutual reciprocity, which requires fair exchange between peers (Cook, 2016). As a result, the human realm is smitten by the plague (*loimos*), sent by the god Apollo. To resolve the crisis, Achilles calls a formal meeting with Agamemnon and the Greek leaders. However, the situation worsens when the captive girl Briseis, Achilles' prize (*geras*), is forcibly taken by Agamemnon to compensate for the loss of his own, exacerbating the breakdown of the systemic relations.

The main value-crash (Cook, 2016) of the story is created by Agamemnon through the forced extortion of his peer Achilles's trophy, which causes him to withdraw

from the battle as a result. The sequence is closed when a message is passed through Thetis to Zeus. This triggers a massive override ordered by Zeus in the form of a divine nod. The sequence shifts to the punishment of the Greek camp and the balancing of the lost honor.

Historical accuracy of the text is disregarded because narrative is measured by its capacity to maintain stability. The story is functionally examined by how well it maintains the structure of human networks intact. To accurately examine these mechanical parts, the baseline definition of the epic is shifted. Myth is not only perceived as a fictional narrative but also as a cognitive framework employed to structure human reality (Cassirer, 1946). The underlying rules that shape how reality is discussed in detail in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* book. Cassirer (1946) demonstrates how human consciousness perceives reality across three levels of apprehension moving from sensory perception to logical, abstract thought. These levels are highlighted by Savodnik (2003) across three stages. At the first level (I), existence equals direct sensory experience. This means that a physical burn and the fire are perceived as an undifferentiated whole. At Level II, the fire is organized into the symbol of "heat" using language. On the highest level (III), the environment is grasped by pure abstraction. The sensation of fire into a logical system of chemical laws (e.g, chemical process of combustion). The *Iliad* is analyzed at the final stage of this progression. It is accepted as a system where raw events are run by the abstract conventions of the epic society. Akin to how logical system of chemical laws function, the whole narrative does so in a similar fashion.

Eco (1976) establishes a semiotic model to highlight the structural function of narrative codes. The raw mythic material of the *Iliad* can be translated through semiotic levels into a readable structure. Yamamoto (2002) claims that the Homeric society lacks state power as there are no laws or police functioning as a control mechanism. Instead, stability is maintained by independent family groups to maintain social order through balanced reciprocity. According to Yamamoto (2002), it is a social exchange system where an action is met with a return of equal value. Honor (timē) is the primary narrative

code (Eco, 1976) and recognized not as a personal emotion but as a social status (Sale, 1963). The military traditions such as function as subcodes within this network. Homeric warrior seeks out to win glory (kleos) and honor (timē). He achieves this through extraordinary individual courageous deeds by mostly engaging in combat. Currency of honor is regulated through the accumulation of material prizes (geras), to prove a warrior's worth (Cairns, 2017). Barthes (1975) notes that the concept of mimesis (imitation) creates a reality effect within the narrative. The constructed social rules appear fully natural to the reader through mimesis. The raw mythic material of the Iliad can be translated through these semiotic levels into a readable structure. Structurally, the system ruptures as the link between a warrior's skill and his recognized honor is broken through taking without consent. This volatile social structure is limited strictly to the Iliad and is independent from real historical models.

According to Saussure (1916/2011), the relationship between langue (the abstract manual of rules) and parole (the individual performance) is recognized. The language operates as a complete, interconnected system of differences. The narrative consists of the physical performance (parole) of an underlying mythic grammar (langue). Levi-Strauss (1955) argues that myth operates on a higher structural level because it transcends beyond linguistic boundaries. While it is inseparable from the physical performance of language (parole), the narrative is simultaneously operated as a timeless, synchronic system (langue). Consequently, the core meaning of the narrative is located entirely within stable bundles of relations. These bundles are classified as mythemes. Through this classification, the system survives translation and function as a universal logical tool.

The whole epic can be considered as a 'second-order semiotic system' in Barthesian terms, according to Segal (1983). The primary narrative forms generate a particular mythic language. This notion can be applied to the Iliad as Greek myth shows a high degree of metalingual consciousness. It means that myth explains its own rules to the reader through semiotic consciousness. The cultural meaning is actively dictated by the structural relationship between the physical signifier and the mental signified

(Segal, 1983). In the *Iliad*, this relationship could be between the physical sign (e.g., a divine arrow) and its meaning (e.g., plague) that drives the plot forward. Segal (1983) argues that the entire mythic compilation is a coherent "megatext". It operates as an unconscious hard drive for cultural encoding of conventions. The analysis transitions from a general social order into the specific structuralist methods of Greimas and Barthes.

2. Methodology

Emily Wilson's 2023 translation of the *Iliad* offers a clear and modern language base for analysis. "The Quarrel" book 1 is selected as the primary source for analysis because it provides sufficient evidence of systemic rupture when the network is forced to choose between the two clashing values of honor. Reality is organized into functional parts by myth, establishing the epic as a self-regulating symbol (Moss, 2021). The methodology is applied with the notion that these parts are "structures". The epic functions as a closed system maintaining social order. The removal of material prizes functions as a literal deletion of a warrior's structural value. Hence, this sequence is an ideal field for the investigation of such structural shifts.

As myth is an important literary narrative structure, it could be seen as a part of structuralism. As Piaget (1970) claims, structuralism is a concept with the universal properties of wholeness, transformation, and self-regulation. The narrative governs its own internal rules because the whole epic is a self-regulating machine where individual parts are subordinated to systemic law. Structure is not a loose collection of parts, unlike aggregates. It functions as an interconnected system of parts. These parts do not possess independent value because "wholeness" ensures that the system is greater than its fragments. "Transformation" allows the system to be dynamic rather than static. The network automatically maintains itself by "self-regulation", which is a process of actively reshaping elements. This regulation always follows the fixed underlying laws. Meaning is analyzed as a structural calculation of systemic value rather than through the laws of structural grammar (Greimas, 1987).

Barthes (1975) organizes the narrative into three distinct levels: functions (the internal logic), actions (the actantial roles), and narration (the reporting of events). Functional partitioning is utilized to break the story down into these structural levels (Barthes, 1975). Narrative units are divided into actions which are classified as distributional functions and meanings. This study focuses exclusively on the former category. Within this category, the parts are identified as nuclei, or cardinal functions. These serve as the high-risk turning points of the plot. A nucleus is defined as a narrative unit whose removal causes the entire narrative to disappear (Fabbri, 2022). As nuclei force a narrative choice through specific actions, they operate as the mechanical gears of the system. Every nucleus triggers a consequence and, in return, shifts the social order. Narrative nuclei are divided into either social value-crashes in the human network or Extremistan shocks caused by divine intervention. Barthes (1975) utilizes a specific method, namely “commutation” to identify narrative sequences as nuclei. It is a structural test where a narrative unit is supposedly removed or altered from the sequence to measure its impact on the outcome of the story. If the removal causes a change in the outcome, it is classified as a nucleus. As an example, if the withdrawal of Achilles is removed from the sequence, the overall narrative collapses. This proves that the original unit has a high functional weight. This measurement determines the logical weight of an event by checking if its removal would cause the system to collapse. Catalyses surround the nuclei throughout the narrative and function as procedural fillers. These units possess an “extraordinary freedom” to fill the narrative space with notations that do not change the plot’s direction (Fabbri, 2022). By utilizing this expansion to stretch the time between key events, a steady, predictable rhythm is created to delay the next systemic break. The structure of the story can also be seen as a string of nuclei and catalyses complementing each other to create flow. Therefore, a single functional action is often stretched into a long sequence of catalyses. This inflation builds calculated suspense and maintains the predictable Mediocristan baseline rhythm (Barthes, 1975).

The same structural logic explained in the former paragraph is mapped onto the universal grammar of the plot using A.J. Greimas's (1966) actantial model. Barthes (1975) proposes that this actantial framework is the classification of these roles by their position in a storyline. It focuses on how meaning is produced through relationships rather than characters' psychology. These are to be analyzed not as personal human choices, but as the mechanical results of a grammar. The framework interprets each action as a mathematical input that drives the narrative. An actant is defined not as a person, but as a structural role that performs a specific function within the narrative. Greimas (1966) derived this term by refining Propp's (1928/1968) character types into a simplified grammar. Foundational character functions were originally categorized within the Morphology of the Folktale (Propp, 1928/1968, pp. 79–80).

This initial system was further refined into a simplified narrative grammar to establish the current terminology for the actantial model (Greimas, 1966, pp. 173–174). The transformation can be explained as "who the character is" to "what the character does" within the plot. The actantial model is originally developed by Greimas (1966). Hébert (2006) demonstrates these as the axis of desire (subject/object), the axis of transmission (sender/receiver), and the axis of power (helper/opponent). These narrative roles are simplified into six actants. The sender (initial trigger) directs the subject to obtain the object (desired value) for the receiver. The helper (supportive variable) aids the subject whereas the opponent (resisting force) hinders it. In brief, actants function as structural triggers that allow for mathematical calculation within this matrix. According to Bal (2009), the narrative is separated by layers. Fabula is the chronological sequence of events in a story, while the story is how those events are arranged.

Within the theoretical model of Todorov (1969), narrative is structurally defined as a transformational process. It is driven by the altering states of balance. The narrative transitions from stability (equilibrium) into crisis (disequilibrium), followed by a required resolution (new equilibrium). The "Mediocristan" environment provides stability and can be interpreted as the state of equilibrium. Todorov (1969) argues that this

movement from an initial equilibrium to a new equilibrium. Such a movement follows a progression of events: a stable situation is broken by a disruptive force (e.g, a crisis) and met with a restorative action. It is finally settled into a new equilibrium. Todorov's model is used as a tool within the Barthesian functional partitioning step. The "disruptive force" that breaks the initial equilibrium is identified as a primary nucleus. Therefore, a nucleus functions not just as a narrative turning point. In the analysis, it is the mechanical trigger that pushes the system out of its Mediocristan stability and into the Extremistan environment.

At the linguistic level, stability is maintained by the formulaic system of the Homeric art-language. This dialect is generated through metrical necessity. It is identified as a specialized, non-vernacular code that was not utilized in everyday life. Parry (1930) argues that this system functions as a traditional diction that originates from oral composition. It is constructed entirely as a mechanical tool. This specific methodology was required by the physical reality of the epic as a part of the oral mythic tradition. The poem was originally transmitted through the live performance sung by poets in the presence of an audience.

As originally established by Parry (1930) and Lord (1960), oral-formulaic theory (OFT) system reuses formulas across specific thematic units to build predictable story patterns. As defined by Parry (1930), a formula is categorized as "a group of words regularly employed under the same metrical conditions" (p. 80). The *Iliad* is a highly uniform composition since this selection of vocabulary depends on the limits of the metrical constraints which are dictated by the formula. From the poet's perspective, vocabulary selection is provided by the hexameter rather than emotional decisions. Dactylic hexameter is a specific meter used in Homeric epics. It functions under metrical rules as a pattern of long and short syllables, where each line has six beats. The epic is driven predominantly by the mechanical fitting of these formulas. Despite the repetitive nature of the narrative, a marginal degree of lexical selection is permitted (Lord, 1960, p. 43). This structural stability suggests that any narrative deviation can be identified as an Extremistan shock.

The narrative sequence of Book 1 is broken down systematically to apply the methodology. First, the text is separated using the commutation method. Through this test, the Extremistan shocks (nuclei) are isolated as targeted events with significant functional value from the predictable Mediocristan baseline (catalyses). Once a nucleus is identified, the transformational mode of Todorov is utilized to validate how the initial equilibrium is ruptured by this disruptive force. In the Greimassian actantial model, the characters are placed into the universal grammar of the fabula. The narrative flow is demonstrated by an established matrix across the axes of transmission, desire, and power. This matrix serves as proof of how a divine signifier determines a new equilibrium of the human network.

3. Results

Before presenting the material, the criteria used to classify these nuclei are outlined for clarity. The classification depends on the degree to which an event shapes human actions within the narrative. A primary nucleus denotes an intervention that produces an immediate shift in the plot. Athena's physical restraint of Achilles and the refusal of Chryses' ransom fall into this group, as each action places the characters on a specific narrative path. A secondary nucleus operates more like an environmental disturbance. Apollo's plague belongs to this type as it creates pressure on the system, yet it leaves several possible responses open to the characters. At the highest level is the overriding nucleus, reserved for events that determine the overall direction of the story. The nod of Zeus functions as a decisive command that fixes the narrative's progression.

Table 1: Structural Nuclei of Book 1

Sequence	Narrative Event	Line Numbers	Structural Classification	Systemic Function
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1	The Rejection of the Ransom	Lines 26–32	Primary Nucleus	A total rupture in the rules of fair exchange is established. The social contract is entirely destroyed. Consequently, a structural collapse in the value of honor is triggered.
2	The Plague of Apollo (<i>loimos</i>)	Lines 43–52	Secondary Nucleus	An unpredictable shock to the system is introduced. A divine disaster is deployed to force a structural shift, bypassing the mechanical failure of human leadership.
3	Athena's Physical Intervention	Lines 194–222	Primary Nucleus	An external force prevents ongoing violence. The human network is unable to control itself. This intervention functions as a response to this systemic inability.
4	The Nod of Zeus	Lines 528–530	Overriding Nucleus	This is the final authoritative command. It structurally leads to the narrative conclusion by restoring the balance of the overall system.

3.1 Structural Collapse by Value Failure

The actants within book 1 are positioned into the actantial matrix to analyse the structural outcomes of their interactions. An exchange within the human network begins with the arrival of Chryses (lines 11–12). Chryses is coded as the subject and his daughter, Chryseis as the object. The Greek army is identified as the receiver, while Agamemnon is counter force as the opponent. It is demonstrated by figure 1. that the

opponent is located on the axis of power to block the subject from reaching the object.

(AXIS OF TRANSMISSION)

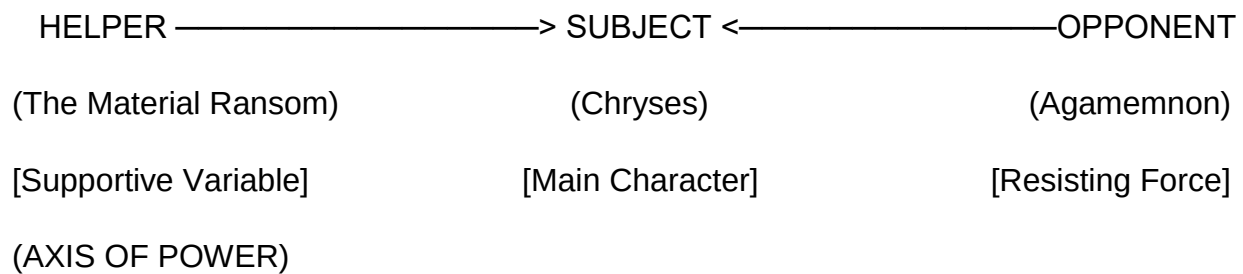
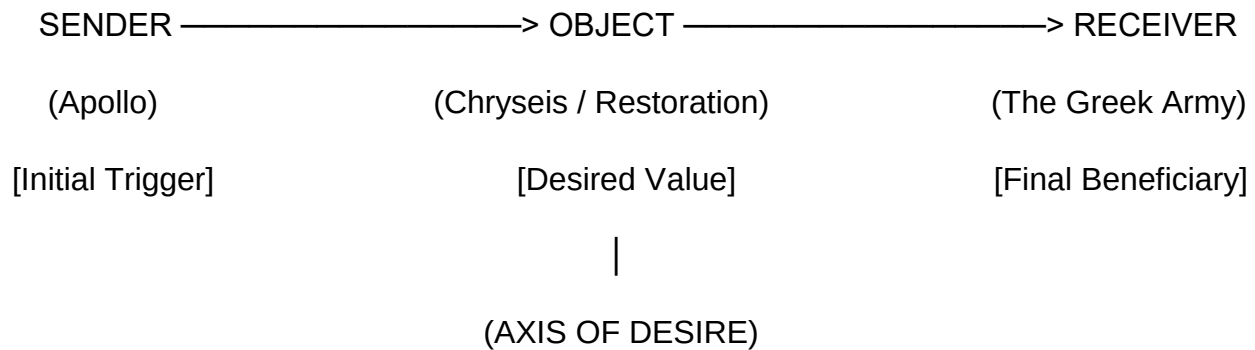


Figure 1: The Actantial Model (3.1)

The rejection of the ransom for Chryseis (lines 26–32) breaks down the reciprocal baseline, creating a state of disequilibrium (Todorov, 1969, p. 75). This refusal is classified as the first primary nucleus. Here, the social contract is challenged by the opponent through threatening the subject. Agamemnon takes the prize of Achilles, Briseis by force and completely ignores negotiation. This results in a negative reciprocity which breaks the network's equilibrium (Cook, 2016, p. 95).

The currency of honor is devalued, and the stable Mediocristan baseline shifts to a state of volatility (Yamamoto, 2002). The removal of Achilles' honor induces a shift from the Mediocristan baseline to the state of Extremistan.

3.2 Divine Intervention as Restored Balance

The human network (lines 53–58) forms an assembly as a protocol. This gathering can be observed as the movement of the plot to return to equilibrium from disequilibrium. In this actantial matrix, Achilles is the subject. Calchas functions as the structural translator who converts the occurrence of the plague into semiotic signs (lines 93–100). The Extremistan shock is translated as the direct outcome of the ransom refusal, initiated by Apollo as the sender. Athena's arrival (lines 194–222) is recognized as a primary nucleus where she pulls Achilles by his hair to halt his aggression. He is also granted future prizes by her. The collapse of the human network is avoided as Achilles is kept under control by this divine action.

Gods can override human networks as there is a clear structural gap between the mortals and the divine. Vernant (1989) argues that there is a clear ontological difference between the human sub-body and the divine super-body. Sarischoulis (2016) suggests Olympian gods manage conditional network variables, while the existential boundaries of the fabula are controlled by *moîra*.

Upon reaching the limits of human network capacity, the resulting chaos is regulated by the will of Zeus (Dios boulē) (Thrash, 1968). Therefore, disorder is organized into a new systemic hierarchy. The divine nod by Zeus (lines 528–530) is a semiotic sign classified as an overriding nucleus.

4. Conclusions

A primary contribution is the synthesis of classical narratology with modern risk epistemology by Nassim Taleb. The primary theoretical model is built upon the structural and semiotic methodologies of Greimas and Barthes. Oral-Formulaic Theory (OFT) is utilized as a secondary tool to confirm the structural stability of the narrative by Mediocristan baseline. This foundational rhythm is established before primary narratological tools are applied.

A systematic model is contributed to the field of Homeric semiotics where narrative actions are categorized as mechanical signs. It is aimed to demonstrate that the underlying cultural meaning of the epic is generated through the exchange of systemic codes rather than character psychology. Human networks within the structure of the *Iliad* are suggested to be functionally incapable of processing high-impact volatility. As established in Section 3.1, the network collapses upon the refusal of the ransom because human agencies cannot resolve reciprocal errors. As a result, a divine override is necessary (Section 3.2). Athena prevents ongoing violence by a divine command directed at Achilles. On the final stage, Zeus is deployed to set the narrative into a new direction.

The *Iliad* is revealed as a fully self-correcting system. Divine intervention functions structurally as an Extremistan programming code. This code repairs systemic ruptures when Mediocristan baseline is broken by the demonstrated value-crashes. The structural laws of the epic are maintained by balancing human error.

This framework offers ancient texts to be interpreted not merely as literary artifacts, but as functional tools utilized to uncover systemic crises. Upcoming research may apply these actantial and functional models to the remaining books of the *Iliad*. The ontological boundaries explored through the physical manifestation of *ichor* (divine blood) in Book 5 is suggested for investigation. Book 22 can be further analyzed to evaluate the absolute limits of mortality during Hector's death. These studies, when integrated, may demonstrate the overall structural consistency of Homer's *Iliad*.

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