De-Romanticizing Troilus and Cressida

In *Troilus and Cressida*, the main characters display startlingly little respect for tradition and history. In fact, one quality that endears the play to a modern sensibility is its *disdain for the conventions of honor, class structure, and chivalry*. Clearly Shakespeare sees his characters and their situation with a jaundiced eye - a perspective that speaks to the contemporary view towards politicians and wars.

It is important to remember, when looking at *Troilus* as an anti-Romantic play, that Shakespeare is not only incorporating Homer and the *Iliad*, but is also taking on the tales of the Middle Ages. Troilus and Cressida were characters from English legend, not Greek mythology; in de-romanticizing their story he is thus addressing *the tendency in his own era to see men as predominately true and women as predominately false*. This view, popularized in Chaucer's work and promulgated in pamphlets and treatises, stemmed in part from the story of Troilus and Cressida. By showing the ghastly context of that romantic legend, Shakespeare removes much of its applicability. True, Cressida is still false, and as she herself says, she is guided more by her eye than her heart, but *in setting this betrayal against a backdrop of relentless cynicism as opposed to chivalric heroism, Shakespeare takes some of the sting out of Cressida’s falseness, and reveals Troilus’ honor and honesty as inexcusably naive.*

Domesticity and War

Achilles’ tent and Pandarus’ garden - two brief bastions in a brutal and senseless war - represent common grounds on either side of the Trojan Wall. In each location, a tested warrior (Achilles and Troilus, respectively) finds tranquility with his beloved (Patroclus or Cressida) while a bawdy comedian (Thersites or Pandarus) watches and comments on the action. In both instances - though to differing degrees - these places of seeming comedic contentment are in truth unlikely sources of anxiety. Troilus considers his passion for Cressida “womanish”: his love for her keeps him from fully committing to the battlefield. And of course Achilles’ choice to spend time in his tent rather than at arms is the Greeks’ chief worry in the play. This decision, too, is feminized, as when Thersites comments that Patroclus is his “masculine whore.”
This tendency to criticize Achilles and Patroclus or Troilus and Cressida in their attempts to establish domestic strongholds makes sense to some degree. In times of war, questions of domesticity often take a backseat to the action on the field. Yet there is a central irony here, in that the Trojan War is being waged in revenge for a domestic affront: the cuckolding of Menelaus. The dichotomy between domesticity and war falls apart upon closer examination, and many of the characters (particularly Thersites, who calls the argument a simple matter of a whore and a cuckold) are willing to enthusiastically point out this irony.

The question, then, is this: why should Achilles and Troilus neglect their own domestic pursuits in favor of those of Menelaus, Helen, and Paris? Why does one love affair warrant a war, while theirs must flounder? *Troilus and Cressida* does not answer this question explicitly, but the play does suggest that Paris and Helen are no different than any other set of lovers. That their dalliance hurt a king’s pride is unfortunate, but that it resulted in a brutal and horrific war is the true tragedy of the play. The empty political language of honor is what ultimately drives the war. Without the stubborn selfishness of Paris and Menelaus, Troilus would have Cressida, Achilles would have Patroclus - and the pursuit of domestic happiness would not be seen as aberrant behavior.

**The Exchange of Women**

One of the chief ways that patriarchal societies - such as those of the Ancient world and Jacobean England - maintained themselves was through marriage. Traditionally, the head of the household - the man - reserved the right to give his daughter to another man. This exchange of a woman between her father and her husband is depicted in countless dramas of the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage. Usually when the patriarchal exchange is disrupted, tragedy ensues (think, for example, of *Romeo and Juliet*).

In *Troilus and Cressida*, however, this exchange of women is treated quite cynically. The go-between, Pandarus, who is Cressida’s acting father after Calchas’ defection, is little more than a pimp. His attentiveness to Cressida’s virginity (or lack thereof) is alarming, and his relentless pandering cheapens the sanctity of love. If he is a merchant, to borrow Troilus’ analogy from his first soliloquy, then Cressida is no more than merchandise being shipped from shore to shore.

*Troilus and Cressida* also provides us with an odd example of a reverse-exchange. The Greeks and Trojans conspire to take Cressida from her husband and give her back to her father. This husband-to-father exchange flies in the face of the traditional social order. If Cressida was not debased enough by Pandarus, her status as chattel is clarified in this
second exchange. Indeed, to hammer the point home, Shakespeare has Cressida passed around by the Greeks upon her entrance to their camp. Cressida’s subsequent decision to forsake Troilus for Diomedes can only be considered in the context of her treatment. At least with Diomedes, perhaps she will find stability.

**Genre**

One of the most frequent criticisms of *Troilus and Cressida* has to do with **genre**. Is it a comedy, a history, or a tragedy? Nowadays, it is often categorized as a tragedy or a “problem play” - a designation that includes *All’s Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*. In the seventeenth century, however, it was considered a comedy, at least judging from the original publisher’s foreword (“A Never Writer to an Ever Reader”), even though its full title is “The History of Troilus and Cressida.”

Jacobean critics, playwrights and playgoers were much less attentive to the question of genre than modern audiences. Tragedies were often called histories, and both genres almost always had comedic elements. But there is something about *Troilus and Cressida’s* modulations between bawdy comedy and bitter tragedy that makes it at once difficult to characterize and a commentary on genre itself. Speech to speech, scene to scene, the genre of the play seems to shift, and yet there is method to this madness: a current of **cynicism** and **disappointment** runs through the whole of the drama. In addition, part of this disappointment stems from the **failings of the language of romance and chivalry** - in other words, a failure of genre language. This is a love story, but it isn’t. It’s a heroic history, but it is hardly heroic.

Part of the play’s point thus seems to be to **subvert the very conventions of genre**. The speeches of Agamemnon, Nestor, and Ulysses belong to a recognizable tradition of epic rhetoric; the play’s high tones are consistently brought down-to-earth by the ugliness of the events being depicted. Likewise, Troilus’ sincere protestations of love cannot stand up to the political maneuverings that rend Cressida from him and cast her into the society of the Greeks; their love language takes on wartime reality, and ultimately fails. That each character seems to speak in his or her own genre - and that each of these genres, except perhaps Thersites’, is undermined by the events - makes this a play about plays. It is a drama about genres - and specifically, about how genre can be problematic.

**Homoeroticism, Performance, and Privacy**

Patroclus and Achilles are more than good friends, more than fellow actors with a shared sense of humor about their blustery leaders: they
are quite unquestionably lovers. Our modern conception of homosexuality - that some are born biologically predisposed to be sexually attracted to their own gender to the exclusion of the other - did not exist in Shakespeare’s time. And as we see from Achilles’ oath of marriage to a Trojan princess and Thersites’ remark about Patroclus that he loves a “commodious” prostitute, neither Achilles nor Patroclus is exclusively attracted to men. Still, Thersites’ vitriolic comment that Patroclus is Achilles’ “masculine whore,” combined with their own sweet and romantic exchanges, leaves little doubt as to the nature of their relationship.

Though in ancient Greco-Roman societies physical relationships between older and younger men were to some extent acceptable, Achilles’ relationship with Patroclus is a source of great anxiety in the play. His decision to spend his days in his tent with Patroclus is seen by Ulysses and many other Greeks as the chief reason for their lack of success at Troy. Homoeroticism, privacy, and the cynical performances that the lovers put on together are conflated in the Greek leader’s anxiety about Troy. They see Achilles’ tent - and the dalliances and masques that go on within it - as their foremost threat.

However, it is worth questioning the accuracy of this interpretation of Achilles’ defiance. The Trojan War, as Troilus reminds us again and again, is a horribly confusing event. The whole enterprise is full of cynical performances, with Ulysses standing as the reigning cynic. The Greeks displace their misgivings about the venture as a whole onto the threat emanating from Achilles’ tent; however, what Achilles and Patroclus know - that the Trojan War is to a great extent a farce - is no less true because of this displacement. At the end of the play, although Achilles is restored to marriage and battle and Patroclus is dead, the tent - that bulwark against the absurdities of war - still looks like a most welcoming alternative to the battlefield.

**Opinion**

Oftentimes Shakespeare’s plays contain a “keyword” of sorts - a word that is repeated again and again, almost obsessively, that gives a unique vantage into the imagination of the playwright at the time he was writing. Macbeth’s might be “time,” Hamlet obsesses about “action,” Timon of Athens returns again and again to “dogs,” and Titus Andronicus focuses on “hands.” In this vein, the scholar Frank Kermode offers “opinion” as the keyword to Troilus and Cressida. He notes that the word is spoken ten times over the course of the play - more than in any other Shakespearean play - and that it uniquely captures the play’s particular obsession with the contingency of values.
The words that Troilus is so careless in throwing around - honor, glory, love, worth - all depend upon opinion. These concepts aren’t valuable in and of themselves - they aren’t even real in and of themselves; rather, they depend on being situated in a particular point of view. Consider how many times in the play the question of whether the Trojan War is worth fighting is raised. The conversation always turns to Helen’s value: is any woman, however beautiful she might be, worth so much bloodshed? Is there a way to quantify beauty in terms of other people’s lives? When the Trojan princes debate about whether or not to give Helen up, they ultimately decide that Helen’s actual value is not important - what is important is how much she is desired. As long as Troy holds onto such a woman, Troilus suggests, Troy will hold onto its honor. But honor, like anything, is a matter of opinion; if the Greeks ceased to want Helen, no doubt Troy would cease to want her too. Where does that leave the city’s honor?

**Opinion, then, is like a vortex without a bottom.** It is constructed out of many voices, many minds, all of which can and do change constantly. Achilles’ worth is a matter of opinion (a fact that Ulysses realizes and manipulates in his Ajax-Achilles scheme); the validity of Cassandra’s prophecies is a matter of opinion; even constancy is a matter of opinion. Just think: if Troilus had never seen Cressida kissing Diomedes, her subsequent letter would have been the truth to him; his opinion of her would have been different. Whether she truly remained constant or not, she would have remained so to him. Even when he sees her cheating on him, he tells himself that *his* Cressida - the Cressida of his opinion - is more important than “Diomed’s Cressid” - the false Cressida of public opinion.

*Troilus and Cressida* confronts us with a basic problem of human life: the problem of subjectivity. We can see things only as ourselves. Nothing is valuable in and of itself - because nothing exists in a vacuum. Everything must pass through the rigors of opinion, and opinion is anything but constant.

**Words and Deeds**

Some readers might feel that, for a war play, *Troilus and Cressida* has too many words. Indeed, until the Fourth and Fifth Acts the play is nothing but words - promises, speeches, debates, flirtations. Only at the end of the play is the audience rewarded with violence, and even then viewers may be left dissatisfied. *Ajax’s big fight with Hector,* built up over many scenes, is little more than a skirmish, and Achilles’ massacre of Hector when he is unarmed is simply murder. The play’s deeds, then, belie the play’s highbrow words.
The connection between words and deeds is one that Shakespeare explores in almost all of his mature plays. However, in Troilus more than in any other this very exploration provides the chief action of the play. Troilus and Cressida behave more like philosophers or scholars of romantic language than young lovers. They ask searching questions about the nature of words - of imagined desire, of love’s promises, of oaths and vows - and fail to consider the import of acts. Troilus wonders how actually being with Cressida could ever compare to imagining her; Cressida delves into her own language constantly, wondering whether she should defer the act with Troilus forever so as to hold on to the promise of their words of love.

In Troilus, the relationship between words and deeds falls apart. The more highbrow the language, the more sodden and depressing the actions attached to it. Consider Troilus and Cressida’s promise to be true to each other, Agamemnon and Nestor’s pompous discourses, and Troilus and Paris’ protestations that keeping Helen is somehow honorable, though an audience member would be loath to discover how. Mere language dissipates before the grim realities of an unjust war.


**Suggested Essay Questions**

1. Compare Troilus’ **method of wooing** Cressida with Diomedes’. Which method seems better-matched to Cressida’s own language? What does Shakespeare accomplish with this contrast?
2. Discuss the **domesticity/war dichotomy** in Troilus and Cressida. How do characters in the play discuss this contrast? Does the play compromise the dichotomy in any way?
3. How is Troilus and Cressida a **comedy**? How is it a **history**? How is it a **tragedy**? Discuss the play’s generic ambiguity in connection to its form and content. What does the play say about genre?
4. Discuss the character of Thersites. **What does he contribute to the play?** Is he an **honest** character? If so, how is his honesty comparable or incomparable to Troilus’?
5. Troilus and Cressida has an infamous final act - it is often considered confusing and inappropriate to the preceding action. **What does the effect of ending with Pandarus bring to the play?**
Do you see a metaphorical resonance in the end of the play as it stands?

6. **How are women valued in *Troilus and Cressida*?** Look at Cressida’s first soliloquy in the context of female value. How does language play into value?

7. **Compare Act One scene three and Act Two scene two. How do the Greeks debate in contrast to the Trojans?** What do they respectively discuss?

8. There are three obvious “private” spaces in the play - Achilles’ tent, Pandarus’ house, and Paris’ room. All three of these spaces are associated with sexuality. Compare and discuss these spaces. What, if anything, distinguishes them? In this context, discuss the relationship between war and sex in the play.

9. **How does *Troilus and Cressida* treat performance?** Discuss the performances in Achilles’ tent, Pandarus’ songs (as well as his words on the subject), and other examples of performance. How is performance a source of anxiety in the play?

10. **Address the ways in which *Troilus and Cressida* challenges the chivalric tradition.** Who embodies chivalry in the play and what are these characters’ fates? How is this an anti-Romantic play in terms of its poetry?

---

**http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/troilus/context.html**

*Troilus and Cressida* is one of Shakespeare’s later plays, written shortly after *Hamlet* (1600-01), but before the other great tragedies. Composed around 1602, it was probably performed in the winter of 1602-3, but no record of the performance survives, and the play itself was not published in a collection for six more years. For these reasons, a number of critics have suggested that it was performed only once, or not at all—possibly because some of the characters in the Greek and Trojan armies were thinly disguised caricatures of contemporaries, either of other playwrights or of members of King James’s court.

The genre classification of *Troilus and Cressida* has been in dispute from the beginning. Labeled a history play in an early folio, it bears superficial similarities to the tragedies, but lacks much of the typical tragic plot structure. Today, *Troilus and Cressida* is often grouped with the so-called “problem comedies”—with *Measure for Measure* and *All’s Well That Ends Well*. All three share a dark, bitter wit and a pessimistic view of human relations that contrast sharply with earlier, sunnier comedies like *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*. 
Sources for the play include classical mythology and Homer’s *Iliad*, which contains the Achilles-Hector story arc. The romance of Troilus and Cressida is derived from pseudo-Homeric medieval sources—and, of course, from Chaucer’s great fourteenth-century epic, *Troilus and Criseyde*. (Shakespeare, true to form, used only the bare bones of these stories for his play, and emphasized the Elizabethan idea of Cressida’s falseness over Chaucer’s more sympathetic interpretation.) In reading *Troilus and Cressida*, it is important to remember the popularity of all these stories in Shakespeare’s time. For the audience, the story of Troy was a well-known one and the events of the play, including the denouement, would have been expected from the beginning—Cressida’s treachery and Hector’s death would have been as predictable as the sinking of the Titanic is for moviegoers today.

http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/troilus/section8.rhtml

**Analysis and Themes**

*Troilus and Cressida* is one of Shakespeare’s more difficult—and, some might say, unpleasant—plays to read or to watch. Derived (and diverging) from classical and medieval accounts of the siege of Troy—notably Homer’s *Iliad* and Chaucer’s fourteenth-century *Troilus and Criseyde*—the play offers a debased view of human nature in war-time and a stage peopled by generally unsympathetic characters. Like many of the great tragedies, the broad theme is the relationship of, and conflict between, personal life and the interests of the state—in this case, the conflict between the romance of the title characters and the war-time politics that send Cressida away from her lover into the Greek camp. But this theme coexists with a general pessimism unmatched even in the darkest tragedies, as classical heroes like Achilles and Ajax are presented as self-absorbed thugs, and the central romance of Troilus and Cressida is rhetorically reduced to lust, so that in the memorable phrase of the Greek slave Thersites, “all the argument is a whore and a cuckold” (II.iii.75).

There is an uneasy division between the romance and the political action; the two plot lines are not fully integrated until the later stages of the play, giving the action a disjointed feel. At the same time, Shakespeare uses anti-climax throughout the play, so that scenes that we think will be critical turn out to be letdowns. This is especially true in the duel between Hector and Ajax in Act IV, which ends in a draw, and again in Act V’s final battle, in which the events we expect do not transpire: *Troilus is not* avenged for the loss of his beloved, and *Hector does not* have a climactic duel with his great adversary, Achilles, who instead
ambushes him unarmed and kills him. The events of the play, then, are almost defiantly unsatisfying.

There are many redeeming qualities to *Troilus and Cressida*, however, including some of the finest philosophical speeches in all of Shakespeare—which, some critics have suggested, are more impressive outside the context of the play than within it. The argument between Hector and Troilus over the value of fighting to keep Helen in Troy is notable for its rhetoric and depth of insight, and so too are the speeches of Ulysses, one of the play’s most interesting and intelligent characters, who discourses at length on the role of order in society (as displayed in the Greek camp) and on the relationship between time and reputation. Thersites, too, is an interesting and entertaining character—while his language tends to be abusive and coarse, he is the play’s only moralist, and often seems to speak for the playwright as he provides bitter, scolding commentary on the crimes and lusts of his supposedly more heroic fellow characters.

http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/troilus/study.html

**Study Questions**

Is *Troilus and Cressida* a tragedy? Defend your judgment.

Clearly, this play contains strong tragic elements. It offers a bleak view of the world, in which the forces of love and justice are undone by circumstances and cruelty, and it ends with the death of a major heroic figure (Hector) and the betrayal of another (Troilus). But while these elements give the play strong tragic resonance, it does not fit the mold of classical tragedy followed by Shakespeare’s later works, such as *King Lear, Antony and Cleopatra*, and others. First of all, there is no clear tragic hero—Hector’s death resembles the murder of Julius Caesar, among others, but Hector himself is not the hero of the play. That honor seems like it should belong to the title character, Troilus, but Cressida, the woman who would have become his tragic heroine—Cleopatra to his Antony, or Juliet to his Romeo—elects not to die, or even to be faithful, choosing to betray him instead. His realization of this betrayal might be considered to constitute a tragic illumination, but this illumination is not followed by death, which would be the expected ending of such a tragedy. Indeed, the unsympathetic nature of the characters and the deliberately anticlimactic style that Shakespeare employs, make the play seem almost like a black comedy—or better, a tragicomedy.
Discuss how Shakespeare undercuts the idea of heroism in *Troilus and Cressida*.

The story of the siege of Troy is one of the foundational works of western civilization, and its figures—Achilles, Hector, Ulysses, Ajax, and others—are usually portrayed as larger than life. In this play, however, they are ruthlessly stripped of their heroic pretensions. While their rhetoric soars, their behavior reveals them to be a collection of brutes and braggarts. Hector manages to come through with most of his heroism intact, but Achilles—the greatest of the Greek warriors in Homeric legend—behaves like a cowardly thug, sulking in his tent and then killing Hector with a gang of comrades when Hector is unarmed. Ajax is portrayed as a less intelligent version of Achilles, Agamemnon is unable to keep order in his army, Diomedes is driven by lust—and the women fare even worse. Instead of being beautiful and virtuous, both Helen and Cressida are described or depicted as fickle and shallow, willing and eager to be unfaithful, far from any traditional feminine ideal. This overall degradation has as its narrator Thersites, the unpleasant slave who becomes a kind of moralist, since he is the only one to point out the gap between the words of these “heroes” and their behavior.

Discuss the play’s treatment of romance.

Judging from its title, *Troilus and Cressida* would seem to be a tragic romance, like *Antony and Cleopatra* or *Romeo and Juliet*. But *Troilus and Cressida* is really a story of infidelity: the unfaithfulness of Helen to Menelaus, which precipitates the Trojan war, and then the infidelity of Cressida to Troilus, which takes up the story’s central narrative. And “romance” in the play is portrayed as being a pretentious kind of lust. The language of the play is thick with references to “whores” and “lechery,” which seem to encompass all male-female relations. Cressida, the supposed romantic heroine, does not marry her beloved, as she would in a different kind of play—instead, she only sleeps with him, and their tryst is enabled by her uncle Pandarus, whose very name suggests “Pander,” an Elizabethan term for a pimp. The central relationship is thus reduced to a prostitute, her procurer, and her eager lover—hardly the stuff of great traditional romance.

Is Cressida a sympathetic character? Why or why not?

Discuss the role of Thersites in the drama.

Analyze the character of Ulysses. Is he a sympathetic figure?

Discuss the portrayal of war in the play.

Compare and contrast the characters of Hector and Achilles.
Discuss the character and role of Pandarus.

Analyze the argument that the Trojan princes have in Act II, Scene ii over whether to continue the war. Who is right, Troilus or Hector?

http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/xTroilus.html

**Type of Work: Tragedy of Ignorance**

*Troilus and Cressida* is classified as a tragedy, but who suffers the tragedy is arguable. Although callow Troilus loses his love, he fails to realize she was a wanton to begin with. Moreover, he does not die or experience a moment of epiphany. Hector dies, but he is neither a title character nor a character whose psyche and personality undergo thorough examination. Fickle Cressida, forcibly separated from Troilus, does not resist the Greeks. In fact, she welcomes their attentions, in particular those of Diomedes. She is anything but tragically heroic.

One may fairly argue that the real tragedy in the play lies in the major characters’ ignorance of who they are and what spurs them to action. Troilus, Cressida, Achilles, Ajax, Paris, et al., are blind to their faults and fail to learn from the mistakes they make. True, Hector ends the duel with Ajax shortly after it begins, for he realizes the folly of fighting with a relative. But he later challenges Achilles, not understanding the larger truth that all men come from the same human family.

But not only do the characters fail to understand themselves; they also fail to understand (or they wish to ignore) the significance of a key event as it unfolds: the surrender of Cressida to the Greeks in exchange for the captive Trojan Antenor. This development evens the score: The Greek Diomedes has the Trojan Cressida, the Trojan Paris has the Greek Helen, and the Trojan Troilus and the Greek Menelaus are cuckolds. In other words, the cause of the war, the abduction of Helen by Paris, has been negated by the surrender of Cressida to Diomedes.

However, the war goes on—for pride, for glory, for lasting fame.

**Key Dates**

**Date Written:** 1602.

**Publication:** 1623 as part of the First Folio, the first authorized collection of Shakespeare’s plays.

**Sources**
The main sources for the play were accounts of the Trojan War from Greek myths; from Homer’s epic poem, *The Iliad*; and from Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*.

**Setting**

City of Troy and surrounding plains in northwestern Anatolia, a region in the Asia Minor that is part of modern-day Turkey. The action takes place in Troy and the Greek camp outside the walls of Troy. Anatolia is west of Greece (across the Aegean Sea) and north of Egypt (across the Mediterranean Sea). The time is about 3,200 years ago in recorded history’s infancy.

**Background From Greek Mythology**

In the ancient Mediterranean world, feminine beauty reaches its zenith in Helen, wife of King Menelaus of Greece. Her wondrous face invades every man’s dream, including a young Trojan named Paris. He decides one day that he has to make her his own. So, with the help of his Trojan friends, he kidnaps Helen and takes her to Troy (in present-day Turkey). Infuriated, King Menelaus and his brother, Agamemnon, assemble a mighty army of which Agamemnon is supreme commander and cross the sea to make war against Troy and reclaim Helen and Greek pride. The great Greek storyteller Homer told part of the tale of the Trojan War in *The Iliad*, depicting the warriors on both sides—Achilles, Hector, Ajax the Great, Menelaus, Diomedes and Odysseus (Ulysses in Shakespeare’s play)—as heroes worthy of imitation. In *Troilus and Cressida*, Shakespeare depicts them as quite human, even bumbling, petty, and stupid. Some of them are morally corrupt. **Shakespeare’s version of the story begins at the end of the seventh year of the Trojan War.** The plot summary follows.

**Themes**

*Ignorance breeds mediocrity.* The central characters in the play do not understand themselves and do not learn from their mistakes. Consequently, they do not grow or change radically; they remain small and mediocre.

*Love is blind.* Troilus falls in love with Cressida without due heed to her faults.
Fame and glory are false gods. The Greeks and Trojans kill for glory, bragging rights, and eternal fame—false gods that entice them onto the path of self-destruction.

It is folly to fight a war for a trivial reason. The Greeks and Trojans went to war after Paris took Helen from King Menelaus, bruising Greek pride and honor. After seven years of war, the combatants stubbornly continue to fight.

Appearances are deceiving. Outwardly, Cressida and Helen are beautiful and charming; the various warriors, handsome and mighty. Inwardly, they are all ugly, spiteful, weak, and/or depraved. Make some mention of the symbolic value of the One in Sumptuous Armor.

Plot Structure

The plot centers on a love story (involving Troilus, Cressida, Pandarus, and Diomedes) and a war story (involving Achilles, Agamemnon, Ajax, Hector, and other soldiers). Three events interweave the two stories: the defection of Calchas to the Greeks, the agreement to exchange Cressida for Antenor, and Hector’s proposal to fight a Greek warrior one on one. Thersites and Ulysses comment on the action—Ulysses with eloquence and Thersites with invective that points out the shortcomings of the so-called heroes.

Anticlimaxes

There is no high point in Troilus and Cressida; nor is there a surprising or shocking twist or turn. Each time the play approaches what promises to be a climactic moment—for example, Troilus’s confrontation with Diomedes upon the departure of Cressida to the Greek camp, Hector’s fight with Ajax, Cressida’s reception in the Greek camp, the Act V showdown between Achilles and Hector—the moment ends in anticlimax. Cressida willingly becomes the mistress of Diomedes, Hector and Ajax fight to a draw, Cressida welcomes the attention of the Greeks, and Achilles waylays Hector with the help of fellow Greeks when Hector is unarmed and resting.

Role of Thersites
Thersites is a slave who runs errands for the Greek warriors. Ironically, this lowly fellow is the one character in the play who well understands the folly of the war and the inanity of its participants. Shakespeare makes him the conscience of the play—a sharp-tongued, often sarcastic conscience. Time and again, he openly insults the other characters in diatribes laced with invective. But his characterization of them as incompetents and nincompoops is generally accurate. In the presence of Ajax, he tells Achilles that Ajax’s “pia mater is not worth the ninth part of a sparrow” (2.1.47) and that he “wears his wit in his belly and his guts in his head” (2.1.47). Then he turns on Achilles, telling him that “a great deal of your wit, too, lies in your sinews . . .” (2.1.66). Thersites reserves his most searing insults for Patroclus, who engages in a homosexual relationship with Achilles. Here is the conversation (Act V, Scene I) in which Thersites lambastes Patroclus:

THERSITES  Prithee, be silent, boy; I profit not by thy talk: thou art thought to be Achilles’ male varlet. 
PATROCLUS  Male varlet, you rogue! what’s that? 
THERSITES  Why, his masculine whore. Now, the rotten diseases of the south, the guts-griping, ruptures, catarrhs, loads o’ gravel i’ the back, lethargies, cold palsies, raw eyes, dirt-rotten livers, wheezing lungs, bladders full of imposthume, sciaticas, limekilns i’ the palm, incurable bone-ache, and the rivelled fee-simple of the tetter, take and take again such preposterous discoveries! 
PATROCLUS  Why thou damnable box of envy, thou, what meanest thou to curse thus? 
THERSITES  Do I curse thee? 
PATROCLUS  Why no, you ruinous butt, you whoreson indistinguishable cur, no. 
THERSITES  No! why art thou then exasperate, thou idle immaterial skein of slave-silk, thou green sarcenet flap for a sore eye, thou tassel of a prodigal’s purse, thou? Ah, how the poor world is pestered with such waterflies, diminutives of nature! (5.1.16-22)

Black Comedy, Problem Play

Because of its cynicism and mocking tone—as well as its depiction of legendary Greek heroes as stupid, petty, incompetent, or fickle—Troilus and Cressida resembles a dark comedy. This play is also classified as one of three of Shakespeare’s “problem plays” (along with Measure for Measure and All’s Well That Ends Well) because of its presentation of heroes who are seriously flawed. Audiences used to applauding and
identifying with admirable heroes and heroines find it difficult to applaud or identify with the flawed characters in *Troilus and Cressida*.

**Study Questions and Essay Topics**

1. Which character in the play is the most despicable? Explain your answer.
2. Are there any admirable characters in the play? Explain your answer.
3. Write an essay that compares and contrasts Cressida’s concept of love with Juliet Capulet’s (Romeo and Juliet).
4. Write an essay that compares and contrasts Shakespeare’s depiction of the Greek and Roman warriors with Homer’s depiction of them in The Iliad.

http://www.pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/monkeynotes/pmTroilus82.asp

**CHARACTERS**

**Hector**

Warm-hearted, courageous, magnanimous, kind and dynamic, Hector, son of Priam is the brain and the arm of Troy. The views expressed about Hector proclaim him as the very prop of Troy, unmatchable in battle, except by Achilles. Brave and generous to the point of foolhardiness, he is a powerful fighter, but too naive on the battlefield to live long. Often, he neglects to kill adversaries whom he has knocked down - a habit that prompts Troilus to comment: ‘Brother you have a vice of mercy in you, /which better fits a lion than a man.’

Hector’s attractive personality has an almost magical effect on most of the other characters in the play - the Greeks are reduced to awe-struck admirers, almost a fan club, when he put in an appearance at their camp. The force of his personality transforms Ajax who, for the larger part of the play, seems devoid of generosity, into a courteous knight. But even feeble-witted Ajax knows that this degree of magnanimity does not suit the times. Everybody, except Achilles, recognizes and admires Hector’s bravery, generosity and stature.

Troy’s most admired warrior, and certainly the most admirable character in *Troilus and Cressida*.* Hector’s tragic naiveté* makes him willfully
irresponsible. He fails to see that Achilles is a ruthless coward willing to put aside all principles of ‘fair play’ to murder ‘the pillar of Troy.’ Excessive generosity costs him his life. The audience sees that the great warrior lives in a never-never land where honor is placed before life itself. He believes the code to which he adheres, is universal, and his dying words express disbelief that Achilles can discard it.

But Hector has his share of bad points. He has to be judged not only as a soldier but also as a leader and decision-maker and in the ultimate analysis, he is a failure. He has gambled the survival of Troy in the pursuit of honor and has hopelessly misjudged the values that animate the arena in which he excels - the War. His failure to comprehend the real nature of his world costs him his life. He might be the most attractive character in the play, but he lets himself down twice. Once, during the debate, and next when he chases and kills a man for his armor. His failure is the greatest in the play because his responsibility is the greatest, and he betrays it through his folly. His fatal error occurs when he chivalrously spares Achilles’ life in the scene just before the armor incident. But though Hector is warm-hearted and generous, he stoops to hunt a man for his armor. The diseased body in the shining armor is emblematic of the hopelessness of the War and the disjunction between appearance and reality. He dies, paradoxically through both fulfilling and violating his code.

**Troilus**

A brave warrior and second only to Hector in the Trojan camp, Troilus is the youngest son of Priam and lover of Cressida. Ulysses who speaks admiringly of him and compares him favorably to Hector paints the most complete picture of Troilus. But though Troilus is a great warrior, his judgment is severely defective in the world of love, and he gives himself totally to Cressida to receive in exchange ‘no matter from the heart.’

Troilus’ judgment is also shown to be weak in the debate over the continuation of the War. He, like Achilles and Ajax, is perfectly adapted to the battlefield, but ill equipped for the council chamber. Troilus’ tragedy is his failure to distinguish between bodily impulses, and those of the spirit. His love for Cressida is based upon a Platonic idea of her fairness and chastity. He does not or will not realize that a large part of his fascination is sexual. This propensity for delusion is duplicated in the debate scene where he swerves from recognizing the essentially sordid and trivial nature of the War and insists on concentrating on the honor that can be won fighting it.
He is dedicated to both Cressida and the War, but his failure to join his mental faculties with his passion ensures the annihilation of his love and his city. Even when Troilus realizes that he has been completely deceived by Cressida but he still treats her as if she were a goddess, even risking his arm for the love token which she has besmirched and playing out in miniature the Helen-Paris (Trojans)-Menelaus (Greeks) triangle.

Cressida
Troilus’ love interest; Cressida is bartered by the Trojans in return for Antenor. Her subsequent betrayal of Troilus made her a symbol of female inconstancy in the medieval texts that are the source for Troilus and Cressida. But Shakespeare’s Cressida, a witty woman with a risqué sense of Humor, has been portrayed on the modern stage, as a complex character who can be viewed either as a faithless lover or a victim of War.

No other character in the play is viewed and commented upon from so many different angles. For Troilus, she cannot be equaled.

She is seen engaging in bawdy banter with her servant Alexander and Pandarus, playing the coy lover with Troilus, pledging her love to Troilus, parting from him in distress, enjoying the attentions of the Greek leaders, succumbing to Diomedes.

A scene made even more sordid by being observed by her deceived lover, Ulysses and Thersites and finally attempting to maintain her deception of Troilus in her letter to him.

Pandarus sees his niece as being at least as fair as Helen is. But unlike Helen, Cressida is artful and vivacious. She does not exhibit self-knowledge but does reveal an understanding of the position of women in relation to men.

If she rivals Helen in beauty, she has the potential to surpass her in faithlessness. Her passion for Troilus and her grief at her separation from him are quite genuine, but nothing is deep-rooted in her. Of the four outstanding cases of jealousy in Shakespeare, only in Troilus and Cressida do we find a mad outburst, which is justified.

Like Ajax, Cressida is a symbol of division. The daughter of the traitor Calchas, she forms part of a transaction by which she is used to ‘buy’ Antenor from the Greeks. Though she initially protests, she has to move over to the Greek side. Helen and Cressida are often compared in the play, and at the center of the Trojan War are two faithless women who are fought over, enjoyed and denigrated.
**Pandarus**

Cressida’s uncle facilitates the union of Troilus and Cressida. A **lightweight character given to bawdy talk**, Pandarus provides much of the comedy in the play in his role as go-between. As Helen’s servant who deliberately misunderstands Pandarus’ question, gauges in Act III, Scene 1. He has such little substance that brief acquaintance is enough to plumb his depths.

Along with Thersites, Pandarus is a key figure in ensuring that the audience does not identify too closely with any of the characters. He forms part of the structure that underlines the questioning of other characters, and irony, paradox and deflation - all essential elements in maintaining the detachment of the audience - occur in his dialogues. He also plays a key role in introducing the audience to the Trojan commanders in Act I Scene 2.

For all its brilliant comedy, and though Pandarus has the last word, *Troilus and Cressida* ends on a bleak note.

Pandarus laments after he is shooed away by a disillusioned Troilus who has witnessed Cressida’s betrayal in a scene that was originally thought to be a later interpolation, but is now considered a fitting end to an unclassifiable ‘problem play.’

Observers like Pandarus and Thersites ensure that **heroic language never remains uncriticized**. Pandarus by his utterances debases the love story. Watching the lovers who are about to be parted he says ‘Ah, sweet ducks!’ Plainly, he reduces the intensity of emotion in the meeting. Intelligence is not the most obvious characteristic of Thersites and Pandarus. Pandarus seems to have no great critical capacity at all but only the ability to involve himself in a situation sufficiently to debase it.

Thersites debases whatever he meets and contemplates but does so by vituperation and dissociation - **he will strip the attributes from any man and provide a fresh set from his own imaginings**. Pandarus is a romantic gone rotten. Thersites is a romantic gone sour. Despite the skill with which they are deployed and especially despite the brilliant invention of Thersites’ language, their true function in the play is structural. They present to the audience **other possible views and evaluations**.

**Achilles**

This leader of the Myrmidons is the arm of the Greeks, but has **no voice**.
His arrogance, brashness, cruelty and cowardice make him one of the most unattractive characters in the play. Proud, envious and brutal, he is the only Greek who behaves badly when Hector visits the Grecian camp and it is here that the contrast between the two men is most obvious. His behavior is so out of place that even the normally stupid Ajax steps in with a word to restrain Hector. ‘Do not chafe thee, cousin’ before chastising Achilles. Clearly he is merely a bully, a nonentity without his physical strength. What he reveals of his nature is enough to prepare the audience for his final horrific act.

Despite his formidable reputation as a fighting machine, there are no descriptions of Achilles’ performance on the battlefield, in contrast with the colorful accounts of Hector’s prowess and magnanimity. Only twice is he seen fighting. First, when he retires from the fight with Hector even though he is a fresh man fighting a tired one. Second, when he, like a gang leader, leads the Myrmidons to slay an unarmed Hector in a brutal and cowardly manner. He then trails Hector’s corpse around the battlefield - a savage act that epitomizes the man. Shakespeare found so many unpleasant features in Achilles that he could not create a heroic character. Ultimately, he is exposed as a brutal coward.

Ajax

A half-Greek and half-Trojan warrior, Ajax is second only to Achilles in heroic stature in the Greek camp. All brawn and no brain, he and Achilles are considered ‘draught-oxen’ useful only to ‘plough up the wars.’ ‘A lord of Trojan blood, nephew to Hector.’ Ajax is made up of a multiplicity of good and bad attributes. His bloodline and his position in the Greek camp, make him a virtual symbol of division. He is emulous of Achilles and having been built up by the Greek leadership and acclaimed as their foremost warrior, he becomes as proud and inactive as his rival.

He symbolizes the division in the Greek army which Ulysses refers to in his famous ‘degree speech.’

Ajax’s divided nature is pressed even harder in Hector’s magnanimous speech which brings their duel to a premature close. Hector states the impossibility of dividing Ajax, of separating him into two components.

In keeping with his divided nature, Ajax can appear as a buffoon in one scene and as a generous and courteous knight in another. At one point he is so puffed up with pride at being considered the supreme warrior in the Greek camp that the scabrous Thersites comments, ‘He’s grown a very land-fish, languageless, a monster, a plague of opinion.’
A character with **no self-awareness**, he is completely ignorant of his own lack of intellect. He denounces the pride of Achilles and genuinely believes that he is very different. He believes pride is completely alien to him but those who hear him understand that he can’t even recognize his own pride. He calls Achilles ‘A paltry insolent fellow!’ and Nestor comments in an aside: ‘How he describes himself!’

The whole scene rises to a crescendo of ridicule as Ajax is exposed as possessing the very qualities that he professes to despise in Achilles, and Ulysses’ irony exposes him to the full blast of ridicule. The truth is, Ajax is as foolish as Achilles and like him, the Greek leadership of Agamemnon, Nestor and Ulysses values him only for his prowess in the physical arena. Both the warriors have over evaluated themselves and so dislocated themselves from society - all their actions are intended to gain positions of prominence rather than commit them to a common cause. For them War is a matter of personal glory not a question of sacrifice.

But the same Ajax is transformed into a courteous knight in the presence of Hector, even stepping in to deflect Achilles’ uncouth sallies against the Trojan. So really, he is a man of diverse parts, capable of both complete stupidity and great courtesy.

**Ulysses**

He is the brain of the Greek camp. If the Greeks have a leader, it is Ulysses. But he does not possess the stature of Hector who is described as both the head and the arm of the Trojans. His disgust at the egotistical indolence of the two best warriors in the Grecian camp leads to his famous ‘degree’ speech. Ulysses then conspires with Nestor, the aged commander who has seen three generations of warriors, and the general Agamemnon to play Ajax and Achilles against each other for the larger benefit of the Greeks.

One of the powers behind the scenes, the **manipulator**, the **ace strategist**, Ulysses, is very **clear sighted**. He admires positive qualities like Hector’s bravery and generosity of spirit but recognizes that the ruthlessness of a Troilus in battle is what is really important. His shrewdness is especially evident in Act III, Scene 3, when a perplexed Achilles who wants to know why the other Greek commanders are not treating him with customary ceremony approaches him. Ulysses pretends to explain to Achilles the text that he just happens to be reading, while actually presenting to him the consequences of his recalcitrant behavior.
Thersites

He is one of the rare characters in the play, who is possessed of self knowledge and understanding of others. Thersites precludes sentimentality by constantly reminding the audience of stark realities. He is not clown or fool but a denigrator, and exposes the boils on the body politic with his savage insights. A source of much verbal brilliance, he lets his tongue run away with him and is tolerated with amusement or contempt by his associates. Most memorably, he escapes death at the hands of Margarelon, a bastard son of Priam by claiming kinship through their very lack of kinship.

He is so willing to pursue truth to its ugliest conclusion that he denounces both his own mother and Margarelon’s as whores. His vision is unflinching - in his eyes, mankind is as incapable of worthy judgment as of worthy conduct, and there is no stability of character, ideals, institutions, judgment or imagination in his world. His clear sightedness extends even to himself and when Hector confronts him. He says: ‘I am a rascal, a scurvy railing knave-a very filthy rogue.’

He strips everything and everybody down to bare essentials: Cressida is a whore, in response to being labeled a fragment by Achilles, he retorts ‘thou full dish of fool.’ The war is: ‘All the argument is a whore and a cuckold: a good quarrel to draw emulous factions, and bleed to death upon.’

The most hardheaded and unromantic character in the play, Thersites cannot be dismissed as a degenerate railer since he is so accurate in his pronouncements. Though he plays a major role in the action, he remains an outsider. His presence makes the audience continually aware of the bleakest interpretation of the action and his views of the Trojan War and the main players guides them in their reactions.

Helen

She is wife to Menelaus and the face that ‘launch’d above a thousand ships.’ Her abduction is the ostensible cause of the Trojan War. But she is no more than a pawn. It is the masculine values of the warring sides, which see her as a commodity, causes and continues the War. The audience hears much about her beauty and her peerlessness but when it finally encounters ‘Nell’ as Paris refers her to, it is a moment of profound anticlimax. Helen is revealed as a beauty but one devoid of any other admirable qualities. She is a mere argument for continuing the War. The savage indictment of Diomedes in Act IV, Scene1 and Thersites’ frequent references to her as a ‘whore’ expose her as a prize not worth fighting for.
She is a symbol of the nihilism that is at the heart of the devastating War.

Themes

Value, worth and honor
The crucial debate scene in Act II, Scene 2 focuses sharply on these central Themes. Honor is a central concept that is probed, and the play insists on separating the various standards of honor. Honor is above measurement and Hector asserts the primacy of honor over life but carelessly fails to recognize the dependence of others on his life. For Achilles, his chief antagonist, honor can be put on and off like a suit of armor depending on the circumstances. The Trojan appetite for honor is so insatiable that seven years of destruction and the prospect of annihilation cannot quell their ardor.

Authority, hierarchy, decision making and the consequence of these decisions for society and for particular individuals
This is brought out especially in Ulysses speech on ‘degree’ which insists on the importance of hierarchies, the gradual toppling over of which in the Greek camp has lead to the current impasse. In the play, Shakespeare implies that the consequences of human action and inaction and not fate or destiny caused the inexorable slide into destruction for the Trojans. Indeed, Troy mirrors Ulysses’ picture of the ordered social hierarchy where the common man, Pandarus’ ‘porridge after meat....crows and daws’ must endure mass slaughter because of the lack compassion, wisdom and will of their leaders. Shakespeare enables us to witness the process of the calamity and perceive the consequences of the decisions of the Trojan council for lesser mortals.

The conflict between appearance and reality
An attractive exterior often gives way to an unattractive interior. The great hero Achilles resorts to murder when he is incapable of defeating his enemy in a fair fight. On occasion, this aspect is emblematic: the soldier in sumptuous armor whom Hector pursues and kills, turns out to be diseased. The glittering armor covers a rotten body, just as heroic language covers a rotten cause - the idea of honor overpowers the widespread distaste for the ostensible cause of the War; and the idea of romantic love obscures lechery. Nothing is what it seems.
Sex
Two faithless women who are fought over, enjoyed and abused are at the center of the Trojan War. Helen who is perceived variously as a whore, as left over scraps of food, as a devalued commodity, and Diomedes’ evaluation of her is annihilating. Troilus has to endure the agony of watching Cressida’s betrayal. But women are both sex objects and symbols and Troilus is prepared to risk his arm to regain a besmirched love token, while the very existence of Troy is gambled through the retention of Helen. Love and lechery features powerfully, and throws up serious questions about sexual attraction and desire.

Identity and kinship
Almost every character in Troilus and Cressida is identified in terms of kinship. Even the illegitimate Margarelon and Thersites emphasize the kinship network and the one man who relinquishes his place in this pattern, Calchas, loses his identity.

Time
The theme of Time is significant in the play. Hector perceives time as an arbiter in his dispute with Ulysses. Ulysses claims that his prophecy ‘is but half his journey.’

Here time is seen as neutral and standing outside the bustle of human affairs. When Hector embraces Nestor who ‘has so long walk’d hand in hand with Time,’ he is put in touch with the past through a man who is capable of making a direct comparison between him and his grandfather. Ulysses in attempting to persuade Achilles to fight warns that time erases past achievements and that only present actions count. ‘O let not virtue seek to envious and calumniating time.’

Here Time is active, eagerly seeking to destroy. Time constitutes a major concern of the play. It is seen as one of the key concepts in the human imagination: an abstract tool that becomes a protean character on life’s stage. A demon of the imagination and an impregnable enemy, it can only be defeated through the immortality of fame or procreation and much of Ajax and Achilles’ yearning for glory on the battlefield can be attributed to it.

Time is relative. We seek immortality in a world, which affords only fleeting existence. All monuments decay and collapse but that is not a reason for despair. Rather it should provoke a recognition that Time is not a single element or concept. It is both, an expression of the imagination and a practical tool to be used in the process of living. One
result of the play’s time technique is the domination of Thersites who seems at times to speak for the play.

http://www.pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/monkeynotes/pmTroilus92.asp

IMAGERY

Of all the ‘problem plays’, Troilus and Cressida is the richest in imagery. Its satire and irony are powerful and its concern with the maneuvers of mighty antagonists as they move towards inevitable mutual destruction is full of significance for the modern world.

Appetite is a central concern in the play. Both honor and sexual gratification are greedily sought. Pandarus portrays the whole process of courtship in terms of baking and cautions Troilus against burning his lips. At the other extreme, Ulysses depicts the all-devouring nature of gross appetite as ‘an universal wolf.’ In the paradox, which is typical of the play: appetite is so all-consuming that it devours itself. As Thersites says of Troilus and Diomedes, when he loses sight of them on the battlefield: ‘I think they have swallowed one another. I would laugh at/that miracle; yet in a sort lechery eats itself.’

The process of disintegration throughout the play also involves breaking things down into constituent parts and then comparing them in terms of weight, size and speed. The feature of number, division and parts appears as early as the Prologue: the Grecian princes who set off for War number ‘sixty and nine’, and Troy is described as Priam’s six-gated city. The features of number, division and separation are epitomized in the most significant speeches of the play. Nestor is willing to fight Hector whose youth is in ‘flood’ with his own ‘three drops of blood.’ Cassandra cries ‘Lend me ten thousand eyes, /And I will fill them with prophetic tears.’ Troilus talks of Helen as the woman whose price has launch’d above a thousand ships.’ These divisions are often closely linked with the food imagery and that of cooking, eating and regurgitating.

An aspect of an excess of eating is regurgitation and even the troops leaving the Grecian ships are perceived in terms of being disgorged. Pandarus describes the common soldiers following the heroes as ‘chaff and bran; porridge after meat.’ Nestor sees the emulation of Ajax and Achilles as the bait to goad them into action: ‘two curs shall tame each other; pride alone/Must tar the mastiffs on as ‘twere their bone.
Troilus anticipating the consummation of his love with Cressida says: ‘The imaginary relish is so sweet /That it enchants my sense: what will it be/When that the wat’ry palate tastes indeed /Love’s thrice-repurèd nectar?

But his use of food imagery is more characteristic of the play when he experiences betrayal by Cressida - here, her love is visualized as leftover.

‘The fractions of her faith, orts of her love, /The fragments, scraps, the bits, and greasy relics/Of her o’er-eaten faith are given to Diomed.’

Subtle, delicate imagery connects key elements in the play. Early on, Alexander tells Cressida how Hector has been so angered by being knocked down in battle by Ajax that he can’t wait to get back into action.

First, there is a comparison between the labor that forms part of the life-giving process of producing food with the life-destroying activity of War. Second, there is the image of flowers weeping at the prospect of mutilation and death. The flowers weep in anticipation of what will happen just as Cassandra invites the Trojans to weep before Troy is destroyed. Frequently, future events are predicted or visualized and in the latter case, the future imaginatively becomes the present, as when Cassandra describes Hector’s death to him before he sets out to fight on the fateful day.

Another example is when Nestor provides a thrilling description of Hector wreaking havoc among the Greeks. ‘There is a thousand Hectors in the field;/Now here he fights on Galathe his horse /And here lacks work: anon he’s there afoot, /And there they fly, or die, like scaled sculls /Before the belching whale; then is he yonder, /And there the strawy Greeks, ripe for his edge,/Fall down before him like a mower’s swath. /Here, there, and everywhere, he leaves and takes, /Dexterity so obeying appetite /That what he will he does, and does so much/That proof is call’d impossibility.’

Disease imagery occurs early in the play and runs right through from the ‘open ulcer’ of Troilus’ heart in the opening scene to Pandarus’ sickly complaint about his aching bones in the epilogue which concludes with the word ‘diseases.’ Disease imagery reaches its apogee in Thersites’ denunciation of Patroclus. ‘Now the rotten diseases of the south, the guts-gripping, ruptures, catarrhs, loads o’ gravel i’th’back, lethargies, cold palsies, raw eyes, dirt-rotten livers, whisssing lungs, bladders full of impostume, sciaticas, lime-kilns i’th’palm, incurable bone-ache, and the rivelled fee-simple of the tetter, take and take again such preposterous discoveries!’
Body references and imagery abounds ranging from the metaphorical dismemberment of Cressida by Troilus - ‘Her eyes, her hair, her cheek, her gait, her voice,’ and the desired division of Ajax by Hector through to the literal mutilation of the Myrmidons. That noseless, handless, hack’d and chipp’d gang who run to Achilles for help.

Animal imagery is also pervasive. Especially in the case of the physical giants of Greece, Ajax and Achilles who are used like ‘draught -oxen’ to ‘plough up the wars.’ Alexander likens Ajax to the lion, the bear and the elephant, Ulysses describes him as a ‘horse.’ Pandarus dismisses Achilles as a camel. Ajax and Achilles are described as curs by Thersites, Troilus as an ass, and Ulysses as a ‘dog-fox’ while Nestor is depicted as a ‘mouse-eaten dry cheese.’ But animal references are not limited to abuse. As the retreat is sounded after the death of Hector, Achilles’ comment: ‘The dragon wing of night o’er-spreads the earth,’ provides a powerful image of darkness descending on the battlefield while at the same time, presaging the long night that will culminate in the destruction of Troy.

The imagery of trade and commerce is also used frequently. Take Troilus’ description of Helen: ‘Is she worth keeping? Why, she is a pearl/Whose price hath launch’d above a thousand ships/And turn’d crown’d kings to merchants.’ References to trade depict it as an activity in which men behave deviously. As Ulysses comments to Nestor in advocating the choice of Ajax over Achilles as Hector’s opponent.

‘Let us like merchants/First show foul wares, and think perchance they’ll sell: If not, /The luster of the better shall exceed/By showing the worse first.’ Cressida becomes an item of merchandise, as Calchas says that the Trojan prisoner Antenor can be used to ‘buy’ his daughter. When Diomed had delivered his devastating assessment of Helen to Paris the latter responds ‘Fair Diomed, you do as chapmen do, /Dispraise the thing that they desire to buy; /But we in silence hold this virtue well, /We’ll not commend, that not intend to sell.’ Thus the imagery of trade is used to reinforce that this is really a world of market transactions and not one of high-principled conflict.

LANGUAGE

The language in the play is tough and many speeches are not merely ambiguous, but have an awkward construction, the verse often exhibiting a strain which reflects the stress of emotions experienced by the characters who voice them. Characters often use a distinctive kind of
Agamemnon, the leader of the Greeks talks in an orotund, pompous style often using fantastic and newly coined words like ‘tortive’, ‘protractive’ and ‘persistive.’ Thersites scabrous words and abuse flow out in a rush - the unstoppable truth, and Cressida’s double entendre gives a glimpse of her real divided nature.

Shakespeare uses instant verbal patterning: parts are compared with wholes, delineation, disintegration, fragmentation and linking of these to the fabric of kinship and the associations of food in its various forms including remains, to make the audience more conscious of the way in which humans handle their affairs.

**COMPARISONS/CONTRASTS**

There are constant comparisons and contrasts between characters in the play and division is an important theme. Hector and Achilles and by extension the Trojans and the Greeks, Paris and Menelaus who are presented as being equally contemptible, Troilus and Diomedes are all contrasted while Helen and Cressida are constantly compared in the play.

If Helen is the ostensible cause of the War, Cressida is at the centre of the love story. Both the stories are commented upon directly and indirectly throughout the play. At the centre of the War are two unfaithful women who are fought over, enjoyed, abused and denigrated. Both women are light stuff but of the two, Cressida is clearly the more artful and vivacious. Helen or 'Nell' as she is cloyingly referred to by the besotted Paris is in comparison, indolent and almost dim-witted.

Hector and Troilus acknowledge that though the ostensible cause might not be admirable, the War could be used to gain honor on the battlefield. Otherwise, Helen is ‘not worth what she doth cost the keeping.’ In fact, the War is most succinctly summed up by Thersites as ‘All the argument is a whore and a cuckold: a good quarrel to draw emulous factions, and bleed to death upon.’ Likewise, the love story is commented upon both directly and indirectly and ultimately, Troilus, Ulysses and Thersites all view Cressida’s betrayal. So both the love story and the War are exposed as shams.

Pandarus and Thersites both comment on the action and prevent the audience from identifying with any one person and so are parallel characters in a sense. Likewise, Agamemnon and Priam can be compared in their roles as nominal leaders. Even the attitudes of Troilus and Cressida - Troilus is the lover who almost can’t understand the darker
side of sexuality, while Cressida is the quibbling beloved with a fair idea of the manipulative powers of sex. Shakespeare constantly compares and contrasts characters until the audience finally perceives the utter futility of the War, and even questions the very nature of physical attraction and love.

**QUESTIONS:**

1. Hector is the greater man, but Achilles is more effective. Discuss.

2. How is appetite a central concern of *Troilus and Cressida*?

3. *Troilus and Cressida* presents a society moving inexorably towards destruction as the audience watches. Discuss.

4. Is Cressida a daughter of the game or a victim of War?

5. The ‘love’ story and the War story are very tenuously connected. Discuss.

6. Discuss the function of Thersites and Pandarus

7. Why is *Troilus and Cressida* a ‘problem play’?

8. Discuss the major Themes of *Troilus and Cressida*

9. Ajax is a virtual symbol of division. Discuss.

10. The women in *Troilus and Cressida* are mere commodities. Discuss.

**Compare and contrast:**

Hector and Achilles; Cressida and Helen; Troilus and Diomedes; Agamemnon and Priam.

Make short notes on:

The character of Thersites; The food imagery in the play; Ulysses’ ‘degree’ speech.