After he slays Hector in Book 22, Achilles prepares Patroclus’ ceremonial funeral. When the Greeks burn Patroclus’ body, they also hold elaborate athletic contests, a custom in funeral services for distinguished men (Book 23).

As Book 24 opens, Achilles is still so enraged at Hector’s killing of Patroclus that he refuses to return Hector’s body for burial. This is a particularly offensive form of revenge, for both the Greeks and the Trojans believe that certain funeral rites were necessary before the soul of the dead person could find rest. Achilles’ shameful treatment of Hector’s body offends Zeus, who finally orders Thetis to speak to her son and instruct him to give up the body to Priam. Desperate to get his son back the aged king, bowed with grief loads up a cart with a rich ransom to appease Achilles hoping to exchange it for his son’s corpse. Hecuba and Priam pray for guidance as he leaves and in answer Zeus sends down the god Hermes, who is disguised as a young man to aid Priam in his mission.

**LINES 349-467 HERMES GUIDES PRIAM TO ACHILLES HUT**

With that the Helper\(^1\) leapt into the chariot, seized the whip and reins, and breathed fresh strength into the horses and mules. When they came to the trench and wall defending the ships, the guards were preparing their meal, and the Slayer of Argus\(^2\) shed sleep around them, thrust back the bars, and opened the gates, and drove Priam through them with the cart and his gifts.

They came to Achilles’ hut, a high-roofed hut the Myrmidons built for their prince, with beams cut from the fir trees. They had thatched it with meadow rushes, and fenced it with stakes, close-set to make a courtyard. The gate to the yard was held by a single fir-wood bar that needed three Myrmidons to drive it home or draw it back, though Achilles could do so alone. This gate Hermes the Helper opened for the aged king, ahead of the glorious gifts destined for fleet-footed Achilles. Then he stepped down from the chariot saying:

“Venerable lord, my Father sent me to guide you on your way. You have been visited by an immortal god, for I am Hermes. Now I must leave you and return, and not be seen by Achilles, for it would be wrong for a god to be entertained openly by a mortal man. But you must go in, and clasp his knees, and invoke his father Peleus, and his mother, of the shining tresses, and his child, and so move his heart.”

**LINES 468-551 PRIAM MOVES ACHILLES’ HEART**

With that, Hermes left for high Olympus, while Priam climbed down from his chariot, leaving Idaeus to handle the horses and mules. The old king went straight to the hut frequented by Zeus-beloved Achilles. He found him there, with only the warrior Automedon and warlike Alcimus of all his friends. They were busy attending to his meal. The table stood at his side but he had finished eating and drinking. Great Priam slipped in unobserved, and reaching Achilles, clasped his knees, and kissed his hands, the fearful, man-killing hands that had slaughtered so many of his sons. Achilles was astonished at the sight of godlike Priam, as were his friends. They stared at each other, astounded, as men do in the hall of a wealthy nobleman, when a stranger, who has murdered a man in a moment of frenzy in his own country, seeking refuge abroad, bursts in on them.

But Priam was already entreating Achilles:

“Godlike Achilles, think of your own father, who is of my generation, and so is likewise on the sad threshold of old age. Perhaps his neighbours are troubling him, and there is no one to protect..."
him from harm, or ward off ruin. But he at least can rejoice in the knowledge that you live, and each day brings the hope of seeing you return from Troy. While I, I am a victim of sad fate. Of the best of my sons, the best in all of Troy, not one is left. Fifty sons I had, when you Achaeans landed, nineteen by the one wife, and the rest by other ladies of my court. Most of them have fallen in furious battle, and the defender of the city and its people, my prime recourse, Hector, you have killed, as he fought for his country. I come now to the ships to beg his corpse from you, bringing a princely ransom. Respect the gods, Achilles, and show mercy towards me, remembering your own father, for I am more to be pitied than he, since I have brought myself to do what no other man on earth would do, I have lifted to my lips the hand of the man who killed my sons."

His words had moved Achilles to tears at the thought of his own father, and taking the old man’s hands he set him gently from him, while both were lost in memory. Priam remembered man-killing Hector, and wept aloud, at Achilles’ feet, while Achilles wept for his father Peleus and for Patroclus once more, and the sound of their lament filled the hut.

But when Achilles was sated with weeping, and the force of grief was spent, he rose instantly from his chair, and raising the old king by his arm, he took pity on his grey beard and hair, and spoke eloquently to him:

“You are indeed unfortunate, and your heart has endured much sorrow. Surely, though, there is iron in your spirit, daring to come alone to our ships, and face the man who slew so many of your noble sons? Come, sit here, and we will shut away our sorrows, despite our grief, since there is but cold comfort in lament. The gods have spun the thread of fate for wretched mortals: we live in sorrow, while they are free from care. Two urns stand in Zeus’ palace containing the experiences he grants mortals, one holds blessings, the other ills. Those who receive a mixture of the two meet with good and ill, but those whom the Thunderer only serves from the jar of ills becomes an outcast, driven over the face of the earth by despair, a wanderer honoured neither by gods nor men. See how the gods showered glorious gifts on my father Peleus, from the moment of his birth, wealth and possessions beyond other men, kingship of the Myrmidons, and though but a mortal man, a goddess for a wife. Yet some god brought evil even to him, no crowd of princes, but an only son doomed to an untimely end. He receives no care from me, since I sit here in the land of Troy, far from my own country, bringing harm to you and your children. And you, my aged lord, they say you once were happy, renowned for your wealth and your sons, in all the lands, from the isle of Lesbos, where Macar reigned, through upper Phrygia to the boundless Hellespont. But from the moment that the heavenly gods brought this wretched war upon you, all has turned to battle and slaughter. Endure, let your heart not grieve forever, Sorrowing for your son will achieve nothing, you’ll not bring him back to life, though life will bring you other sorrows.”

**LINES 552-620** **ACHILLES RELEASES HECTOR’S CORPSE TO PRIAM**

“Do not ask me to sit down, beloved of Zeus,” replied the aged king, “while Hector’s corpse lies neglected by the huts, but give him back to me swiftly so my eyes can gaze on him, and accept the ransom, the princely ransom, I bring. May you have joy of it, and return to your native land, since you have shown me mercy from the first.”

Fleet-footed Achilles, frowning answered him; “I need no urging, old man. I have decided to return Hector’s body to you. My own mother, the daughter of the Man of the Sea, brought me a message from Zeus. And I know in my heart, such things don’t escape me, that some god led you to our swift ships. No mortal man, not even a strong young warrior, would dare to venture into this camp, nor having done so elude the guards, nor shift the bar across the gate. So don’t try to move my heart further, lest I defy Zeus’ command and choose, suppliant though you are, not to spare even you.”
The old king, gripped by fear, was silent. Then the son of Peleus ran from the hut, followed by his two companions, Automedon and Alcimus, the dearest of his friends after dead Patroclus. They un-harnessed the mules and horses, brought in the old king’s herald, his crier, and offered him a chair. Then from the well-made cart they lifted down the princely ransom for Hector’s body. They left there two white cloaks and a fine tunic, so that the corpse could be wrapped in them, before he gave it back to Priam to take home. Achilles then summoned two servant-girls and ordered them to wash and anoint the body, first carrying it to a place where Priam could not see his son, lest his grief at the sight provoke his anger and Achilles be angered in reply, and kill him in defiance of Zeus’ command. When the servant-girls had done washing the body and anointing it with oil, and had dressed it in the fine tunic and wrapped it in a cloak, Achilles himself placed it on a bier, and he and his comrades lifted it into the wooden cart. Then he sighed and called his dead friend by name:

“Patroclus, do not be angered, if even in the House of Hades you learn that I have returned noble Hector to his dear father, who has given a princely ransom. Even of that you shall have your rightful share.”

With this, noble Achilles returned to the hut and sat down again on his richly inlaid chair opposite Priam, saying:

“Venerable lord, your son’s body has been placed on a bier and I shall release it to you as you wished. At dawn you may look on him, and carry him back, but now let us eat. Even long-haired Niobe eventually thought to eat, though her twelve children had been slain, six daughters, six sons in their prime. Apollo angry that Niobe had boasted of bearing so many children compared with Leto who had borne but two, killed the sons with arrows from his silver bow, while his sister Artemis killed the daughters. The pair slew them all, and left them lying in their blood, for nine days, since Zeus had turned the people to stone and there was no one to bury the corpses. On the tenth day the heavenly gods gave them burial, and only then did Niobe, exhausted by her grief, take sustenance. Now, turned to stone herself, she stands among the crags on the desolate slopes of Sipylus, where men say the Nymphs that dance on the banks of Achelous take their rest, and broods on the sorrows the gods sent her. Come let us too take sustenance, venerable lord: in Ilium you can lament your son once more, and grieve for him with a flood of tears.”

**LINES 621-676 Achill es agrees a truce for Hector’s funeral**

Swift Achilles sprang to his feet, and went and slaughtered a white-fleeced sheep, which his men flayed and prepared. They chopped it deftly, spitted the pieces, roasted them carefully, and then drew them from the spits. Automedon set out bread in neat baskets, while Achilles served the meat, and they helped themselves to the good things placed before them.

When they had sated their hunger and thirst, Dardanian Priam contemplated Achilles and how marvellously tall and handsome he was, the very image of a god. Achilles too marvelled, at Priam’s nobility and eloquence. When they had gazed at each other to their heart’s content, godlike king Priam said:

“Beloved of Zeus, show me to my bed now, so that, lulled by sweet sleep, we may find ease in rest. My eyes have not closed since my son lost his life at your hands. Then I lamented and brooded over my endless sorrows, and grovelled in the dirt in my courtyard. Now I have tasted food and wetted my throat with red wine, who until now tasted nothing.”

Now Achilles ordered his friends and the servant-girls to set up bedsteads in the portico, cover
them with fine purple blankets, and spread sheets above, and fleecy mantles on top to keep the guests warm. Torch in hand, the girls left the room and swiftly busied themselves at the task. Then fleet-footed Achilles spoke to Priam in a cooler tone:

“You must sleep outside, venerable lord, in case one of the countless counsellors of the Achaeans comes to sit and talk with me, as is right. If he saw you, in the swift passage of darkness, he might hasten to King Agamemnon, and then the return of the corpse to you would be delayed. Now, tell me truly, how long do you need for noble Hector’s funeral. I will keep truce myself for that length of time, and restrain the army.”

The godlike old king answered him:

“You would be doing me a great kindness Achilles, if you indeed allow me time to bury Hector. You know the city is surrounded, and the Trojans would fear to fetch wood from the far hills, otherwise. We will lament him nine days in the palace, and carry out the rites on the tenth. Then on the eleventh day we will raise his barrow, and the people feast. If we must, we will fight again on the twelfth.”

Fleet-footed Achilles replied:

“It shall be as you say, aged Priam, and I will restrain the army for that length of time.”

With that, he clasped the old man’s right wrist, to reassure him. Then Priam and Idaeus the herald lay down to sleep in the portico, their minds still full of thoughts, while Achilles slept in the inner recess of his well-built hut, with the lovely Briseis by his side.

**LInes 677-717 Priam returns to Troy with the Body**

Gods and warriors, overcome by sleep, passed the night in slumber, but not Hermes the Helper, who was awake considering how to lead Priam from the ships, without being challenged by the trusty guards at the gate. Finally, standing at the head of Priam’s bed, he spoke to him:

“Aged lord, now Achilles has spared you, it seems that though still ringed with enemies, you sleep without a care. You have ransomed your son for a princely sum, but the one your sons will need to give will be three times as great, if Atreides or one of his warriors finds you here.”

The old man woke, in fear, and roused the herald. Hermes harnessed the mules and horses, and undetected by their enemies, drove them quietly through the camp himself. As saffron-robed Dawn lit the wide earth, they reached the ford of eddying Xanthus, that noble river begotten by immortal Zeus, and Hermes left them for high Olympus. Lamenting and in tears the two men drove, Priam the chariot and horses, Idaeus the mule-cart carrying the bier. No one in Troy, man or woman, knew anything of them till Cassandra, lovely as golden Aphrodite, from the heights of Pergamus, saw her dear father driving the chariot, and the herald, the city crier, driving the mule-cart, and saw who lay there on the bier. She gave a loud cry, and called to the city below:

“Men and women of Troy, if ever you rejoiced when Hector returned from battle, come now and gaze on him, who brought joy beyond compare to the city and its people.”

Soon the city emptied. Plunged in unbearable grief, all ran to the gate, and close beyond them met Priam, bringing home his dead. Hector’s beloved wife and royal mother flung themselves at the cart. Clasping Hector’s head, they wailed and tore their hair, while the great host of people wept. And they’d have been there, outside the gate, lamenting him the livelong day till the setting of the sun, if old Priam had not called out to them from the chariot:

“Let the mules pass, and when I have brought him to the palace then you can take your fill of lament.”
**Lines 718-775 The Lament for Hector**

At Priam’s request, the crowd parted and made way for the cart. The family led the way to the royal palace, and there they laid the body on a wooden bed, and summoned the chorus of singers to stand beside it, to sing the dirges and lead the lamentation, while the women wailed in chorus. White-armed Andromache made the first lament, cradling the head of man-killing Hector:

“Husband, you have died too young, leaving me a widow in the palace, and your son, whom we his unhappy parents brought into the world, is still a babe who I fear will never grow to manhood. For this city is doomed to perish utterly, as you have perished who watched over it, and kept its wives and children safe, who will soon be captive aboard the hollow ships, I among them. You my child will go with me, and labour somewhere at menial tasks for some harsh master. Or worse perhaps, some Greek will seize you by the arm and hurl you from the wall to your death, angered perhaps because Hector killed his brother, father, son, for many are the Achaeans whose mouths have bit the dust at the hands of Hector, and your father was not a kindly man in battle. Now the people lament you throughout the city, Hector, and unspeakable grief your death has brought your parents. The bitterest grief of all is mine, because you did not die in your bed, stretching out your arms to me, with some tender word that I might have treasured, in tears, night and day.”

Such was her lament, and the women added their grief to hers. Now Hecuba took up the impassioned dirge:

“Hector, dearest to me of all my children, dear to the gods when you were alive, who care for you now therefore in death. Swift-footed Achilles robbed me of other sons, selling them beyond the restless sea in Samothrace, Imbros or in Lemnos veiled in smoke. You he killed with the sharp bronze and dragged you round his friend Patroclus’ barrow, whom you slew, not that he raised him from the dead by doing so, and yet you lie here fresh as dew, as if newly dead, like one whom Apollo of the Silver Bow has touched and killed with his gentlest dart.”

So she lamented, and stirred endless grief. Now Helen followed with a third lament:

“Handsome Hector, dearest to me of all my Trojan brothers! Godlike Paris, my husband, brought me to this land of Troy, though I’d rather I had died there and then, and this is now the twentieth year since I abandoned my native country, yet in all that time I had no harsh or spiteful word from you. If any in the palace reproached me, your brothers, sisters, your brother’s fine wives, or your mother, for your father was ever gentle to me like my own, you would turn away their wrath, and restrain them with gentle acts and words. So I grieve aloud for you, and in my heart for my wretched self, since there is no one else in all wide Troy who’ll be kind or gentle to me, all of them shudder as I pass.”

**Lines 776-804 Hector’s Funeral**

So Helen lamented, and the whole crowd wept. But the old king, Priam, gave his orders:

“Gather wood now, men of Troy, and bring it to the city, and have no fear of some crafty ambush by the Greeks. Achilles promised me, before I left the black ships, that he would restrain their army till the twelfth dawn comes.”

12. What does Andromache foresee as the future of herself and her son? Why has she come to such conclusions?

13. What impact did Hector have on Helen?
So they harnessed oxen and mules to the wagons, and assembled outside the city. For nine days they gathered huge piles of logs, and when the tenth dawn brought light to mortals they carried brave Hector, and, in tears, laid his body on the summit of the pyre and set the wood ablaze.

Next day, when rosy-fingered Dawn appeared, the people gathered at glorious Hector’s pyre. Then when all had assembled they worked together, quenching the embers with red wine, wherever the fire had reached. Then Hector’s brothers and his friends collected his ashes, still mourning him, their cheeks wet with tears. They placed the ashes, wrapped in a purple robe, inside a golden urn, and laid the urn in a hollow grave, covering it with large close-set stones. Then over it they piled the barrow, posting sentinels on every side, lest the bronze-greaved Greeks attacked them before the promised time. When they had heaped the mound, they returned to Troy, and gathered in Zeus-beloved Priam’s palace for the glorious funeral feast appointed.

And such were the funeral rites of Hector, tamer of horses.

Source:
<http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/Iliad24.htm>

14. This is Homer’s final chapter in the Iliad, why do you suppose he ended it with the funeral of an enemy?

15. What aspects of Achilles’ character are revealed in the scene with Priam? How would your perception of Achilles been different if Homer ended on Book 22?

16. Complete a final review over the role of the gods throughout the three parts of the Iliad you read. Consider the following questions: Are they helpful or harmful? Are the humans here puppets of the gods or do they still have free will? Explain your answers.

17. Some critics see the central theme of the Iliad as the idea that people must be generous with one another—that if people allow reason to guide their behavior, they might be able to live together in peace and harmony. Which portions of the epic support this theme?

18. Go back to the notes you made about Achilles as a Homeric hero, add to it qualities from this scene that add to the definition. Review your previous notes on each hero, has your answer to which hero is the “best fit” for a Homeric hero changed? Explain your reasoning.