

The tragic note which we hear in the *Iliad* and in most of Greek literature was produced by the tension between these two forces, passionate delight in life, and clear apprehension of its unalterable framework:

As is the life of the leaves, so is that of men. The wind scatters the leaves to the ground: the vigorous forest puts forth others, and they grow in the spring-season. Soon one generation of men comes and another ceases.

Neither the thought nor the image is peculiar to Homer: the peculiar poignancy is, and it comes from the context. We do not find it in the magnificent Hebrew parallel:

As for man, his days are as grass. As a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone, and the place shall know it no more.  
Psalms 103:15

The note here is one of humility and resignation: Man is no more than grass, in comparison with God. But the Homeric image takes a very different color from its context of heroic striving and achievement. Man is unique; yet for all his high quality and his brilliant variety he must obey the same laws as the innumerable and indistinguishable leaves. There can be no romantic protest—for how can we protest against the first law of our being—nor resigned acceptance such as we find, for example, among the Chinese, to whom the individual is only an ancestor in the making, one crop of leaves on one tree in the forest. There is instead this passionate tension which is the spirit of tragedy.

H. D. F. Kitto, *The Greeks*