

The Odyssey

Introductory Reading

The Nature of an Epic

The Odyssey is an **epic poem**, a long narrative poem which, besides being an action and adventure tale about the travels of Odysseus and the struggles of his son Telemachus, reveals interesting customs, beliefs, and values of the ancient Greeks. **Epic poems** tell of the adventures of heroes who embody the values of their particular civilizations. The Greeks for centuries used the Iliad and the Odyssey, both epic poems by Homer, in their schools to teach Greek virtues. Many later epics used these two stories as models. The Iliad is the primary model for the epic of war. The Odyssey is the model for the epic of the long journey.

Probably epic poems were first told orally by and for people who could not read or write. They were based on a set story line, but were probably improvised at first, made up on the spot. That is why you will see much repetition in the Homeric epics. The oral storyteller had formulaic expressions to describe various events—the arrival and greeting of guests, the eating of meals, the taking of baths. The storyteller would also have some set formulas for describing things like the sea, gods and goddesses, etc. These epics also have extended comparisons which we call **Homeric** or **heroic similes** today. These similes compare heroic or epic events to simple and easily understandable everyday events—events the audience would recognize instantly.

The Odyssey would not have been told in one sitting. Depending on the length of his visit, a storyteller would summarize parts of his story and tell in detail other parts. The tales are complex, revolving around several main characters and spanning many years. Homer's epics tell of the adventures of heroes.

Qualities of an Epic Hero

The Greek nobility expected and demanded of its males that they assume a major role in the warrior culture that dominated their age. Odysseus, like many of the ancient Greek soldiers, is considered a great epic hero. An **epic hero** is a man who seems able to conquer most problems he encounters, although he does not possess any "super" powers. He is faithful to his family, his country, and his god. He is brave, and though he often feels fear, he overcomes his fears because he knows he has responsibilities, which are mainly to defeat evil and allow goodness to prevail. The epic hero is intelligent. Because he has no special powers, he must rely on his brain to get him out of difficult situations. Sometimes, however, a higher force or being will help guide him on his quest. This greater force does not do things for him; rather, the force helps him do things for himself.

The idea of *arete*, the striving for excellence in particular areas of human behavior, is an integral part of the Homeric hero's life. Strength, skill, courage, determination are necessary and admirable attributes both on the athletic field and on the battlefield. *Arete* of mind—in the form of intelligence, insight, or ingenuity—is more common in the older hero. The Homeric hero strives to be the best among his peers. His goal is to achieve the greatest glory in order to earn the highest honor from his peers, his commander, and finally from his warrior society. He has the opportunity to exhibit the greatest *arete* and thus win the greatest glory on the battlefield, for armed conflict presents the ultimate challenge to his abilities. The

Homeric hero usually chooses to act in a way that will gain the public approval that he needs in order to have self-esteem. Odysseus faces different challenges in The Odyssey than in the Iliad, thus *arete* of mind is even more necessary than *arete* in strength and skill.

The idea of METIS (Mêtis), the exercising of prudence, good counsel, planning, cunning, and craftiness, is another quality amply displayed by Odysseus. From our first meeting with the epic hero, he is depicted as cunning, often being called "wily" Odysseus. It is his wisdom and craftiness that helps him survive the various ordeals he faces—during the Trojan War, on his way home, and once he again arrives in Ithaca.

Historical/Legend Basis of Homer's Epics

Homer's The Iliad is set in the tenth and final year of the Trojan War. According to The Iliad, the Greeks had originally attacked Troy to avenge the insult suffered by Menelaus, king of Sparta, when his wife Helen ran off with Paris, a young prince of Troy. The Greek kings banded together under the leadership of Agamemnon, the brother of Menelaus and the king of Mycenae. In a thousand ships they sailed across the Aegean Sea and mounted the siege of Troy. The Greeks were eventually victorious, due mainly to Odysseus's cleverness when he thought up the Trojan Horse trick.

The famous story from the epic is that of the Trojan Horse. Odysseus and his men built a giant wooden horse and left it in front of the gates of Troy as a "peace offering." The Trojans accepted it and rolled it into the city. However, the Greeks had hidden inside the horse, and that night, they sneaked out of the horse and opened the gates to the entire Greek army who came in and slaughtered some of the Trojans and captured others.

Odysseus did not want to go to the war. He was happily married to Penelope and they had a young son Telemachus. Because of a promise he had made many years before, Odysseus was obligated to join the group of Greeks who were setting off for Troy to recapture the beautiful Helen. However, when Agamemnon and Menelaus came to fetch him, he tried to escape enlistment by pretending to be insane. He acted as if he did not recognize his visitors. Instead of entertaining them, he dressed as a peasant and began plowing a field. But Agamemnon and Menelaus were smarter than the wily Odysseus in this instance. They put his baby Telemachus, in front of his oncoming plow. The hero revealed his sanity by quickly turning the plow aside to avoid running over his son.

Who was Homer?

Most historians believe that Homer was a blind minstrel from the island of Chios who lived in the 8th or 9th century B.C. He is considered by the Greeks as their greatest and finest poet, traveling around the land singing stories for people for their entertainment and enlightenment. He was of a class of wandering bards or minstrels later called "rhapsodes" or "singers of tales," the historians and myth-makers of their time.

The Trojan War

The Judgement of Paris

According to legend, the chain of events that led to the Trojan War started at a royal wedding. Peleus, king of the Myrmidons (a race of people created from ants!), was marrying a sea nymph named Thetis. Many gods attended the wedding, but Eris, daughter of Zeus, king of the gods, wasn't invited because she was the goddess of discord and bound to cause trouble.

Angry at being excluded, Eris decided to disrupt the wedding banquet. She threw a golden apple marked "for the fairest" among the guests. The goddesses Hera, Athena and Aphrodite were there, and each thought that she was the fairest of them all. They bickered for a while about who deserved the apple, then asked Zeus to decide the matter.

But Zeus didn't want to get involved, so he sent them to a prince named Paris or Alexander, the son of King Priam of Troy in Anatolia (modern-day Turkey). Despite his royal heritage, Paris had been raised as a simple shepherd after his mother learned in a vision that he would cause the destruction of Troy.

Why did Zeus choose Paris to judge the contest? Some say it was because Paris was the most honest person on earth. Or because he was too dumb to know better than to get involved in a dispute between bickering goddesses. Perhaps Zeus was being a bit sarcastic toward those bickering goddesses when he chose Paris, who was known as a good judge of cattle. Or perhaps it was simply fate, because the judgement of Paris did indeed lead to the downfall of Troy.

The goddesses tried to rig the contest by bribing Paris. Athena promised to help him lead Troy to victory in a war against the Greeks. Hera promised to make him the king of all Europe and Asia. And Aphrodite, the goddess of love, promised to give Paris the most beautiful woman in the world. The beautiful woman sounded better to Paris than power and glory, so he awarded the Apple of Discord to Aphrodite.

She sent him to Sparta to collect his prize. There was just one problem. The most beautiful woman in the world was already married.

The Face That Launched a Thousand Ships

She was Helen, a half-mortal daughter of Zeus. Many powerful men had wanted to marry her, and her step-father, King Tyndareus of Sparta, was afraid this would lead to war. He was also afraid that someone would try to kidnap her (in fact, she had already been abducted by Theseus, the king of Athens, but her brothers had rescued her and brought her home).

Tyndareus convinced Helen's suitors to swear an oath that they would protect her and her husband, whoever he might be. Then Helen married Menelaus, the brother of Agamemnon, the king of Mycenae. After Tyndareus's death Helen's husband became the king of Sparta.

When Paris showed up in Sparta, Menelaus and Helen welcomed him as a guest.

Then Menelaus left Sparta for a while. When he returned, Helen was gone. She had eloped with Paris. Menelaus was furious. Determined to win his wife back, he summoned the princes who had promised to protect Helen, and they agreed to help him attack Troy. Menelaus's brother Agamemnon was the leader of the expedition.

Another member of the expedition was the hero Achilles, son of Peleus and Thetis, at whose wedding the trouble had started. When Achilles was a baby Thetis had dipped him in the River Styx. This made him invulnerable; no weapon could pierce his skin. He just had one weak spot - his heel. Thetis had held him by the heel when she dipped him, so Achilles could still be injured there.

At first the Greek army couldn't set sail because there was no wind. Agamemnon solved that problem by sacrificing his daughter, Iphigenia, to the goddess Artemis. Then the winds turned favorable and one thousand Greek ships set sail for Troy.

The Seige of Troy

The Greeks beseiged Troy for ten years. According to legend, the gods took great interest in the war. Hera and Athena still resented Paris for not giving them the Apple of Discord, so they helped the Greek side. Aphrodite assisted the Trojans. Zeus also favored the Trojans, but tried to remain impartial. Eris and her brother Ares helped both sides because they loved war!

In the tenth year of the seige Agamemnon took Achilles's female prisoner, Briseis, for himself. Achilles was so angry that he refused to fight for the Greeks any longer. But when his friend Patroclus was killed by the mighty Trojan warrior Hector, Achilles returned to the war and killed Hector. Eventually Paris tried to shoot Achilles in the back, but the arrow struck Achilles's heel and he died. Soon Paris, too, was wounded in battle and he also died.

After the deaths of Achilles and another hero, Ajax, the Greeks wanted to give up and go home. But the king of Ithaca, Odysseus, came up with a plan to get the Greek army into Troy. The Greeks built an immense wooden horse and Odysseus, Menelaus, and other warriors hid inside it. After leaving the horse at the gates of Troy, the Greek army sailed away. The Trojans thought the Greeks had given up and had left the horse as a gift.

Paris's sister Cassandra, a priestess with psychic powers, knew the horse was trouble. She tried to warn her father, King Priam, but he wouldn't listen. A priest named Laocoon also warned the Trojans to beware of Greeks bearing gifts. He too was ignored. The horse was brought inside the walls of Troy.

The Fall of Troy

That night, while the Trojans were sleeping, the Greek ships quietly returned. The soldiers in the horse slipped out and opened the city gates, and the Greek army quietly entered Troy. They started fires all over the city. The Trojans awoke to find their city burning. When they tried to flee, they were massacred by Greek soldiers. King Priam and almost all of the other Trojan chiefs were killed. Only Aeneas - the son of Aphrodite and a Trojan royal named Anchises - escaped. The Aeneid, by the Roman writer Virgil, is about Aeneas's travels after the Trojan war. (Homer's Odyssey is about the Greek hero Odysseus's travels after the war.)

Most of the Trojan women were enslaved. Cassandra became Agamemnon's captive. He brought her back to his palace, where both were murdered by Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra in revenge for the death of her daughter Iphigenia.

Helen was more fortunate. During the sack of Troy, Odysseus found her and took her to her husband, Menelaus. He told Menelaus that Helen had helped him steal a sacred Trojan statue, the Palladium. Pleased to hear that Helen was still loyal to the Greeks, Menelaus returned with her to Sparta (it took them seven years to get home) where, it seems, they lived happily ever after.

Was There a Real Trojan War?

Until the 19th century it was widely believed that Troy and the Trojan war were imaginary. Then, in 1871, a German-born American citizen named Heinrich Schliemann began excavating an ancient city in Turkey. To the amazement of many, this retired businessman had discovered the lost city of Troy (also called Ilium, or Ilium in Latin).

Nine cities have been found at the site, one on top of the other. The seventh city was destroyed around 1180 BC and appears to be the Troy of legend. You can still see the ruins of its towers and its walls, which were sixteen feet thick.

Schliemann identified Troy's location through clues he found in the Iliad, the epic attributed to the Greek poet Homer. Little is known about Homer except that he was blind. In ancient times it was believed that he had lived during the Trojan War, but most modern scholars think that he lived in the 8th or 9th century B.C. His poems weren't written down when they were first composed, but were transmitted orally for many years. Some people suspect that the poems were actually the work of successive generations of poets, and that Homer didn't exist.

Of course, the same thing was once said about Troy. Thanks to the work of Heinrich Schliemann, virtually everyone today agrees that the city whose seige Homer described was quite real. The eccentric Schliemann is often belittled as an amateur, even a fraud, but there is no denying the importance of his discovery. Without him we might still regard the Trojan War as nothing more than myth.

What started the Trojan War? It has been suggested that the Greeks may have been fighting to gain control of the Dardanelles, a water passage between the Mediterranean and Black seas, near Troy. Or perhaps the war truly was fought over a woman named Helen. The truth is lost in the past.