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## The *Odyssey* – Background Information

The world's most famous epic poems—Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*—were composed between 900 and 700 B.C. The poems describe legendary events that probably can be traced to real historical struggles for control of the waterways leading from the Aegean Sea to the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea. These real battles would have taken place as early as 1200 B.C., a time that was at least as long ago for Homer's audience as the Pilgrims' landing at Plymouth Rock is for us.

### What is an Epic?

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Epics are long narrative poems that tell of the adventures of heroes who embody the values of their particular civilizations. For centuries, the Greeks used the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in their schools to teach Greek virtues. Therefore, it is not surprising that later cultures, while admiring Homer's epics, created their own epics that imitated Homer's style but conveyed their own value systems. Some epics that follow the basic patterns established by Homer's two stories are Rome's *Aeneid*, France's *Song of Roland*, Italy's *Divine Comedy* by Dante, the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*, the very ancient Sumerian tale of Gilgamesh, and India's *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. The *Iliad* is the primary model for the epic of war. It deals with the events of the Trojan War. The *Odyssey* is the model for the epic of the long journey. It is literally the journey home from the Trojan War for Odysseus, the king of Ithaca.

### The War Story – The *Iliad*

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Homer's first epic was the *Iliad*, which tells of a ten year war fought on the plains beyond the walls of Troy (a city also known as Ilion and Ilium). The ruins of Troy can still be seen today in what is now western Turkey. In Homer's story, the Trojan War was fought between the people of Troy and an alliance of early Greek kings (at this time, each island and area of the Greek mainland had its own king.). The action of the *Iliad* is set in the tenth and final year of the Trojan War. According to the *Iliad*, the Greeks had attacked Troy to avenge the insult suffered by Menelaus, king of the Greek city-state 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. As a result, Helen is known today as "the face that launched a thousand ships." In reality, the war was probably precipitated by disagreements over trade routes.

The audience of the *Odyssey* would have known this war story. They would have known all about the greatest of the Greek warriors, Achilles, who was fated to die young in the final year of the war. They would have known all about the hero of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus. They would have known that it was Odysseus who thought of the famous wooden-horse trick that would lead to the downfall of Troy. Prior to Odysseus' plan, the Greeks were unable to penetrate the massive walls of Troy, fighting for

ten long years outside the city. Odysseus' plan was to build an enormous wooden horse and hide a few Greek soldiers in the hollow belly. After the horse was built, the Greeks pushed it up to the gates of Troy and withdrew their armies, so that their camp appeared abandoned. Thinking that the Greeks had given up the fight and that the horse was a peace offering, the Trojans brought the horse into their city. That night, the Greeks hidden inside the wooden body came out, opened the gates of Troy to the whole Greek army, and began the battle that was to win the war. Thanks to Odysseus' clever plan, the Greeks were eventually victorious, and they burned Troy to the ground.

### ***The Odyssey's Hero, Theme, and Chronology***

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In Homer's day, heroes were thought of as a special class of aristocrats. Their station in life and their general attitudes placed them somewhere between the gods and ordinary human beings. These heroes might experience pain and death, but they were always sure of themselves.

The *Odyssey* is a portrait of a hero in trouble. We can relate to this hero because we share with him a sense of being somehow lost in a world of difficult choices. Like him, we have to cope with unfair authority figures. Like him, we seem always to have to work very hard to get what we want.

The *Odyssey* is a poem marked by melancholy and a feeling of what might be called postwar disillusionment. Odysseus is a soldier whose military expertise is scoffed at by the unimpressed, fairy-tale monsters that populate the world of his wanderings. Even the people of his home island, Ithaca, seem to lack respect for him. It is as if a disinterested society was saying to the returning war hero, "You were a great soldier once, or so they say, but times have changed. This is a difficult world, and we have more important things to think about than your heroics."

In the years before the Trojan War, Odysseus had married the beautiful and ever-faithful Penelope, one of several very strong women in the "man's world" of the Greek epic. One critic, Robert Graves, was so impressed by the unusual importance of women and home and hearth in the *Odyssey* that he believed Homer must have been a woman.

Odysseus and his family are people searching for the right relationships with each other and with the people around them. They want to find their proper places in life. It is this theme that sets the tone for the *Odyssey* and determines the unusual way in which the poem is structured in terms of chronology.

Instead of beginning at the beginning with Odysseus' departure from Troy, the story begins "en media res," in the middle, with Odysseus' son, Telemachus. Telemachus is now twenty years old, threatened in his own home by powerful men who want to rob him of his inheritance, of his self-respect, and want to marry his mother. He is a young man who yearns for the support of a father.

Meanwhile, we hear that Odysseus is stranded on an island, longing to find a way to get back to his wife, child, and home. It is already ten years since his sailing from Troy, twenty years since his original departure from Ithaca. If Telemachus is in search of the inner strength represented by the wished-for presence and approval of his father, Odysseus is in search of a way to establish a natural

balance in his life. The quests of father and son provide a framework for the poem and bring us into it as well because we all are in search of our real identities, our true selves.

## **Myth and the Gods in Homer's *Odyssey***

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Myths are stories that use fantasy to express ideas about life that cannot be expressed easily in realistic terms. For example, Odysseus journeys to the mythical Land of the Dead, a place which depicts the ancient Greek's perception about death and the importance of life, and lessons about the dangers of temptation can be seen in the myth of the Sirens.

In Homer's stories, a god can be an alter ego, a spiritual or psychological reflection of a hero's qualities. Athena, the goddess of wisdom and war, is always at the side of Odysseus in whatever he does. This is appropriate because the soldier Odysseus is known for his clever intellectual abilities. A hero's weaknesses can also be mirrored by divine beings. The god who works against Odysseus is Poseidon, the god of the sea and earthquakes, who is known for arrogance and a certain brutishness. It might be said that to find inner peace, a balance in life, or "a way home," Odysseus must find a means of reconciling brain and brawn in his own life. His physical capabilities and boldness, valued in a time of war, need to be tamed in a society of postwar disillusionment where intellect is now the more valued trait. Only with Athena's help and with Poseidon's acceptance can Odysseus achieve his goal of finding his way.

## **Who Was Homer?**

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Who exactly was this famous myth-maker? No one knows for sure who Homer was. The later Greeks believed he was a blind minstrel who came from the island of Chios. Some scholars feel there must have been two Homers; some think he was a mere legend. It seems sensible to take the word of the Greeks themselves and to accept the existence of Homer at least as an ideal model for a class of wandering bards or minstrels later called "rhapsodes."

These rhapsodes, or "singers of tales," were the historians and entertainers as well as the myth-makers of their time. There was most likely no written history in Homer's day. There was certainly no television, and there was no book of religious stories. Instead, minstrels traveled from community to community singing of recent legendary events or of the doings of heroes, gods, and goddesses. It is as if the composer of the biblical Book of Kings, the writer of a book on World War II, and a famous pop singer were combined in one person. For Homer's people, there was no conflict between religion, history, and entertainment.

## **How Were the Epics Told?**

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Scholars have found that oral epic poets are still composing today in Slavic countries and other parts of the world. Work done by scholars on these poets suggests that stories like the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* would have been told aloud at first by and for people who could not read and write. The stories would have

been composed orally according to a basic set story line. Most of the actual words would have been improvised, made up on the spot, in such a way as to fit a particular rhythm or meter. The singers of these stories would have needed a great deal of talent, and they would have had to work very hard. They also would have needed an audience used to listening closely.

Since Homeric epics are oral stories, they require much repetition within the story. The oral storyteller, in fact, had a store of formulas ready in his memory. He knew formulas for describing the arrival and greeting of guests, for the eating of meals, and for the taking of baths. He knew the formulas for describing the sea and dawn (they are always “wine-dark” and “rosy”) and for describing Pallas Athena (she is always “gray-eyed Athena”). Formulas such as these gave the singer and his audience some breathing time. The audience could relax for a moment and enjoy a familiar and memorable passage while the singer could think ahead to the next part of his story.

When we think about the audience that listened to these stories, we can also understand the value of what 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. For example, at one point in the *Iliad*, Athena prevents an arrow from striking Menelaus. The singer compares the goddess’s actions to an action with which every listener would have been familiar:

She brushed it away from his skin as lightly as when a mother  
Brushes a fly away from her child who is lying in sweet sleep.

Epic poets such as Homer would come to a city and would go through a part of their repertory while there. A story as long as the *Odyssey* (11,300 lines) could not be told at one sitting. We have to assume, therefore, that if the singer had only a few days in a place, he would summarize some of his story and sing the rest in detail, in as many sittings as time allowed. This is how you will experience the *Odyssey*. We will assume that Homer wants to get his story told to us, but that he has limited time in which to do it. We will also assume that before retiring at the end of each segment of the performance, Homer’s audience, of which we are now a part, will want to think about that set of stories. Like most audiences, this one will have many questions about the story: Why is Odysseus crying when we first meet him? How will Penelope and Telemachus fare in their struggle against the suitors? What does this strange tale have to do with us?



THE JOURNEY OF ODYSSEUS

