

HOMERIC EPICS

TROJAN WAR TO RETURN OF ODYSSEUS

ERA SUMMARY – HOMERIC EPICS

The Iliad and the Odyssey were epic poems that told of events that occurred during and immediately after a great war between Achaean Greeks and the city of Troy. They were said to have been created by a blind minstrel named Homer, who lived several hundred years after the Trojan War. Very little is known with certainty about Homer, although he authored what are widely believed to be the oldest and most important epics in Western Civilization.

It cannot be said too strongly how important these stories were to the Ancient Greeks. Every Greek was familiar with them—even Greeks that were illiterate. Many minstrels were thought to know them by heart (all 25,000 lines), and for hundreds of years Greeks of all occupations, from all over the Greek speaking world, listened to bards singing these stories as a favorite form of entertainment. The Homeric Epics held the same importance to Greek culture as the Bible holds to Christian culture. And like the stories in the Bible, the stories in the Iliad and Odyssey are not just about people, but about characters, values, and free will, and how the will of God (or Gods) influences human activity.

The Iliad—A Story of the Trojan War. From the Mortals' point of view, the Trojan War began when a beautiful Greek Princess named Helen was kidnapped by Paris, a Trojan Prince. In order to honor a previously agreed upon pact, all of the Kings of Greece form an alliance to go to war with Troy and win her return. From the point of view of the Gods however, the Trojan War is the result of some bickering between jealous Goddesses on Mount Olympus, with Aphrodite and her lover Ares favoring the cause of Troy, but Athena, Hera and their allies, on the side of the Greeks.

Most of the action of the Iliad takes place in the last year of the war, when the two Greek leaders Achilles and Agamemnon argue over a slave girl, and Achilles, who is considered the Greek's greatest warrior, lays down his weapons and refuses to fight. Achilles sulks and sits out the battle until his best friend Patroclus is killed. At that point his desire for revenge overtakes his self-pity and he leads the Greeks to a great victory before being killed himself.



ACHILLES DRAGGING THE BODY OF HECTOR.

Of course, this outline does not begin to describe the behind-the-scenes shenanigans of the Gods (who have been forbidden by Zeus to interfere directly, but are constantly scheming behind his back), and the complicated sub-themes of desire, envy, war-weariness, honor, loyalty, friendship, pleasure-seeking, glory-seeking, fate, and fear of death that are developed in the epic that made it so fascinating to the Greeks.

The Odyssey—The Ten-Year Voyage of Odysseus

The second of Homer's books concerns the story of Odysseus, one of the Greek Heroes of the Trojan War. When called to fight in the War against Troy, he was happily married to his wife Penelope on the Island of Ithaca. He did not desire to go to war but could not avoid service, so his wife waited patiently for his return. But even after ten years, at the close of the Trojan War, when all the other heroes returned to their homes, Odysseus did not return.

Although Odysseus greatly desired to return home, he was delayed by a series of adventures. He incurred the wrath of Poseidon by blinding his son, a Cyclops, and was denied a safe passage home. Instead, Odysseus and his crew were buffeted about the seas, meeting with cannibals, sorcerers, sea monsters and sirens. After successfully avoiding all these dangers, his crew was caught in a terrible storm and shipwrecked. All perished except Odysseus, who was castaway on the island of the beautiful Nymph Calypso. Although she offered him immortality if he would stay with her, he chose instead to continue his journey home.



HIS OLD NURSE RECOGNIZED THE SCAR ON HIS FOOT.

On his return to Ithaca, however, he found the island in a terrible state. Believing that Odysseus was dead, hundreds of "suitors" had come to contend for Penelope's hand in marriage, and were entertaining themselves at the expense of his household. But the faithful Penelope refused them all through delay and trickery. Soon after Odysseus returned in disguise, she promised to marry the man who could shoot the bow of Odysseus, knowing that no one else could bend it. Then Odysseus, dressed as a beggar, asked to shoot the bow. He, of course, succeeded and used it to kill the intruders, and thereby drove the unwanted suitors away from his property.

Like the Iliad, the Odyssey is rich in eternal themes. The ideas of duty, family, fidelity, fate, the longing for home, the art of deception, and the meaning of mortality, are only a few of the ideas discussed. The Iliad and Odyssey have been read, discussed, and admired for over 2600 years, and are two of the pillars of a classical education.

It is almost incomprehensible to modern students to realize that both poems, which comprise over twenty-six thousand lines of beautiful verse, were "composed" before the Greek Alphabet and writing were well established and were passed down primarily through oral tradition. They were not read by the Greeks, but memorized. And it is not unreasonable to conclude the habit of memorizing enormous tracts of insightful and spiritually uplifting verse may have had something to do with the undeniable genius of the classical Greeks.

RECOMMENDED READING – HOMERIC EPICS

CORE READING ASSIGNMENTS *

Lang - <u>Stories from the Iliad</u>	<i>entire book</i>
Lang - <u>Stories from the Odyssey</u>	<i>entire book</i>
Haaren - <u>Famous Men of Greece</u>	<u>Agamemnon</u> to <u>The Fall of Greece</u> (3)

SUPPLEMENTAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Baldwin - <u>Golden Age of Greek Heroes</u>	<u>The Golden Apple</u> to <u>The Long Siege</u> (14)
Baldwin - <u>Thirty Famous Stories</u>	<u>The Fall of Troy</u> to <u>Penelope's Web</u> (2)
Peabody - <u>Old Greek Folk Stories</u>	<u>Stories of the Trojan War</u> to <u>Adventures of Odysseus</u> (3)
Church - <u>Iliad for Boys and Girls</u>	<i>entire book</i>
Church - <u>Odyssey for Boys and Girls</u>	<i>entire book</i>
Guerber - <u>The Story of the Greeks</u>	<u>The Childhood of Paris</u> to <u>The Burning of Troy</u> (6)
Macgregor - <u>The Story of Greece</u>	<u>Achilles and Briseis</u> to <u>The Bow of Odysseus</u> (10)
Harding - <u>Greek Gods and Heroes</u>	<u>Achilles and the Trojan War</u> to <u>Wanderings of Odysseus</u> (2)
Shaw - <u>Stories of the Ancient Greeks</u>	<u>The Shepherd Prince of Troy</u> to <u>The Wanderer's Return</u> (8)
Morris - <u>Historical Tales - Greek</u>	<u>How Troy was Taken</u> (1)

ALSO RECOMMENDED

Tappan - <u>Old World Hero Stories</u>	<u>Homer</u> (1)
Church - <u>Stories from Greek Tragedians</u>	<u>Iphigenia in Aulis</u> (1)
Horne - <u>Artists and Authors</u>	<u>Homer</u> (1)

* Level I and II Study Questions are based on **Core Reading Assignments**.

CHARACTERS – HOMERIC EPICS

THE ILIAD - TROJANS

- Helen** Beautiful Spartan princess and wife of Menelaus who started the Trojan when she ran off with Paris.
- Paris** Prince of Troy, kidnapped Helen with the help of Aphrodite.
- Hector** Prince of Troy, Brave and Noble leader of Trojans. Killed by Achilles.
- Aeneas** Trojan hero and son of Aphrodite, who escaped Troy and eventually settled near Rome.
- Cassandra** Trojan princess who was given the gift of prophesy, but was never to be believed.
- Priam** King of Troy, who pleads with Achilles for the body of his son Hector.
- Hecuba** Queen of Troy, mother of Hector, Paris, and Cassandra.
- Andromache** Faithful wife of Hector who becomes a concubine of Achilles' son after the war.
- Pandarus** Trojan archer who unwittingly sabotages a truce by shooting Menelaus.

THE ILIAD - GREEKS

- Menelaus** Spartan king and husband of Helen, who raised a fleet of "1000 Ships" to rescue her from Troy.
- Agamemnon** Brother of Menelaus, and Greek leader in the Trojan War. Killed by his wife upon his return home.
- Achilles** Greatest warrior hero of the Greeks, renowned for his fighting skills. Central character of the *Iliad*.
- Patroclus** Dearest friend of Achilles who dons the armor of Achilles and is killed by Hector.
- Thetis** Immortal Mother of Achilles, who seeks to protect him from harm.
- Nestor** Veteran warrior who is too old to fight, but serves as a trusted advisor to the Greeks.
- Iphigenia** Daughter of Agamemnon who is sacrificed to the Gods while the Greek fleet is stranded at Aulis.
- Diomedes** Courageous and noble hero, who leads the Greeks in battle after Achilles quits the field.
- Ajax (Greater)** Strongest and Bravest of the Greek warriors, chosen to do single combat with Hector.
- Briseis** Greek princess who is the cause of a great row between Achilles and Agamemnon during the Trojan War.

THE ODYSSEY - HEROINES AND HEROES

- Odysseus** Greek hero known best for strategy and craft. Central character of the *Odyssey*.
- Penelope** Patient and faithful wife of Odysseus. Kept suitors at bay for twenty years as she awaited his return.
- Telemachus** Son of Odysseus who leaves Ithaca in search of his father.
- Laertes** Father of Odysseus, who sailed with Jason on the Argo and grieves for his lost son.
- Nausicaa** Phaeacian princess who rescues Odysseus when he drifts ashore her land.

THE ODYSSEY - MONSTERS AND IMMORTALS

- Lotus Eaters** Race of people who eat lotus plants that put them into an oblivious sleep.
- Aeolus** Ruler of the four winds, including the Boreas, the North wind, and Zephyrus, the West Wind.
- Circe** Sorceress daughter of Helios, exiled to the island of Aea, where she turned men into beasts.
- Scylla** Six headed sea-monster that grabbed sailors from every vessel that approached her.
- Charybdis** Giant sea monster in the shape of a whirlpool, who consumed vessels that sailed too close.
- Harpies** Ugly winged bird-women, who torment people by snatching their food away.
- Sirens** Beautiful Sea Nymphs who lure sailors to their death with alluring song.
- Clashing Rocks** (Symplegades) A pair of Rocks in the Bosphorus that smash ships between them as they pass.
- Talos** Bronze giant who protect Crete by hurling boulders at passing ships.
- Cyclopes** Race of one-eyed giants, sons of Gaia, freed from Tartarus by Zeus.
- Polyphemus** Giant Cyclops, son of Poseidon, who captures Odysseus in his cave.
- Laestrygonians** Race of man-eating giants who ate a great many of Odysseus's men.
- Calypso** Sea nymph who fell in love with Odysseus and kept him captive for many years.