

An Introduction to the *Odyssey*

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An Introduction to the *Odyssey*



"Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story
of that man skilled in all ways of contending, . . ."



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An Introduction to the *Odyssey*

The *Odyssey* is a tale of a hero's long and perilous journey home.



But, it is also the story of a son in need of his father and of a faithful wife waiting for her husband's return.

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The War-Story Background

The *Iliad* provides the background for Odysseus's story and tells the tale of a ten-year war fought outside the walls of Troy. In Homer's *Iliad*

- the Trojan War is in its tenth and final year
- the people of Troy are fighting an alliance of Greek kings because the world's most beautiful woman, Helen, abandoned her husband, Menelaus (a Greek king) and ran off with Paris, a prince of Troy



The War-Story Background

The *Iliad* provides the background for Odysseus's story and tells the tale of a ten-year war fought outside the walls of Troy. In Homer's *Iliad*

- the Greeks won the war, reduced the city of Troy to smoldering ruins, and butchered all the inhabitants, except for those they took as slaves back to Greece

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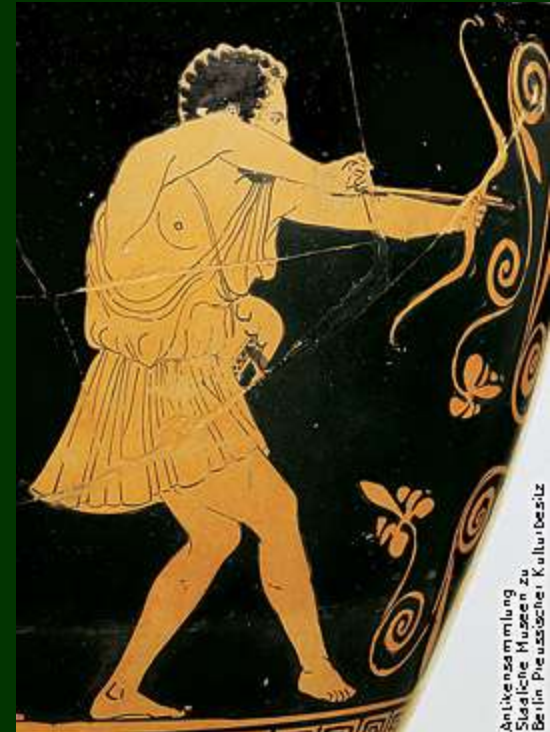
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Odysseus: A Hero in Trouble

Odysseus is not a typical epic hero. He is faced with ▼

- difficult choices ▼
- post-war disillusionment ▼
- disrespect from the people of his homeland



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Odysseus: A Hero in Trouble

Before the Trojan War, Odysseus ▼

- married the beautiful and faithful Penelope ▼
- had one son, Telemachus



Odysseus: A Hero in Trouble

When called to serve in the Trojan War, Odysseus

- pretended to be insane so he wouldn't have to go (he dressed as a peasant, plowed his field, and sowed it with salt)
- revealed his sanity to save his son's life (who was placed in front of the plow)



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The Wooden-Horse Trick

During the Trojan War, Odysseus ▾

- performed extremely well as a soldier and commander ▾
- thought of the famous wooden-horse trick that lead to the defeat of Troy



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The Wooden-Horse Trick

- Odysseus's plan was to build an enormous wooden horse and hide Greek soldiers inside.
- The horse was left outside the gates of Troy, and the Greeks "abandoned" their camp.



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The Wooden-Horse Trick

- The Trojans thought the horse was a peace offering and brought it into the walled city. ▼
- At night, the men hidden in the horse came out and opened the gates to the entire Greek army.

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The Ancient World and Ours

- Odysseus's world is harsh, violent, and primitive.
- The “palaces” that he and his men raid might have been nothing more than mud and stone farmhouses.
- The “worldly goods” they carry off from town might have been only pots and pans, cattle and sheep.

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A Search for Their Places in Life

The Theme of the *Odyssey*

Odysseus and his family are searching for ▾

- the right relationships ▾ with one another and the people around them
- their proper places in life



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A Search for Their Places in Life

The Structure of the *Odyssey*

The story begins with Telemachus, Odysseus's son. Telemachus is searching for his father because he ▼

- is being threatened by rude, powerful men who want to marry his mother and rob Telemachus of his inheritance ▼
- needs his father to return home and restore order



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A Search for Their Places in Life

The Structure of the *Odyssey*

Readers learn that Odysseus ▼

- is stranded on an island, longing to get home ▼
- has been gone for twenty years—he has spent ten years at war and ten years trying to get home ▼
- is in the middle of a midlife crisis and searching for inner peace

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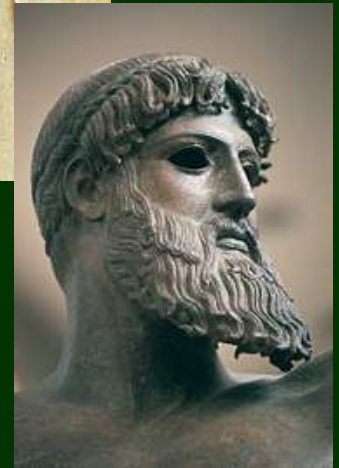
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Relationships with Gods

In Homer's stories, a god can be an **alter ego**—a reflection of a hero's best or worst qualities.

- Odysseus is known for his mental abilities, so he receives aid from Athena, the goddess of wisdom.
- Odysseus can also be cruel and violent. Odysseus's nemesis is Poseidon, the god of the sea, who is known for arrogance and brutishness.



Relationships with Gods

Myths in the *Odyssey*

Greek myths plays an important role in the *Odyssey*.

- Homer is concerned with the relationship between human and gods.
- For Homer, the gods control all things, including Odysseus's fate.

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Epics and Values

Epics are long narrative poems that tell of the adventures of heroes who in some way embody the values of their civilization. ▼

- The Greeks used Homer's epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, to teach Greek virtues.

More about Epics



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Epics and Values

The Epic Tradition

All epic poems in the western world owe something to the basic patterns established in Homer's epics. ▼

- The *Iliad* is the primary model for an epic of war. ▼
- The *Odyssey* is the model for an epic of the long journey.



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The Telling of Epics

Epics and other tales were probably told by wandering bards or minstrels called **rhapsodes**. Rhapsodes were

- the historians, entertainers, and mythmakers of their time
- responsible for spreading news about recent events or the doings of heroes, gods, and goddesses



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The Telling of Epics

Epics were originally told aloud. ▼

- They followed basic story lines and incorporated formulaic descriptions. ▼
- Most of the words were improvised to fit a particular rhythm or meter. ▼
- Epics included Homeric, or epic, similes that compare heroic events to easily understandable everyday events.



The Telling of Epics

Epics such as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were probably told over a period of several days.

- Singers might have summarized part of the tales, depending on how long they stayed in one community.

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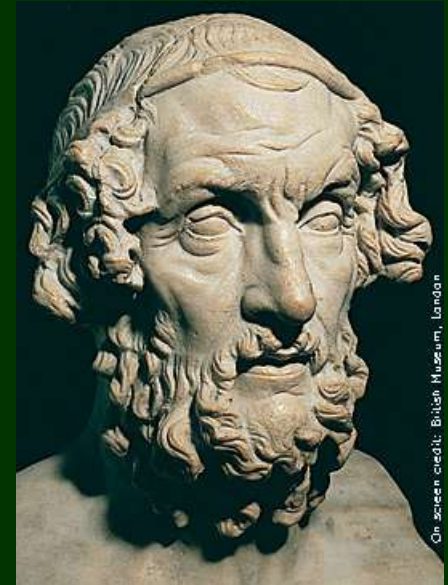
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Homer

No one knows for sure who Homer was. ▼

- Later Greeks believed he was a blind minstrel, or singer, from the island of Chios. ▼
- One scholar suggests Homer was a woman because home and hearth played such an important role in his stories. ▼
- Some scholar think there were two Homers. Some think he was just a legend.



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