

Homer: Epic Poet

Homer wrote two of the world's greatest epic poems, the Iliad and the Odyssey. Yet the details of Homer's life are almost entirely unknown.

Little is known about Homer. Yet he created the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, two of the world's greatest works of literature. Homer was a Greek poet who probably lived around 850 B.C. He may have been a wandering bard—someone who recited poems. According to tradition, he was blind, although this may be a myth. Homer may also have written some shorter poems called the Homeric Hymns. These poems praise gods worshipped during Homer's time.

The Iliad and the Odyssey Written over 2,000 years ago, Homer's poems have stood the test of time. No study of the world's great literature would be complete without the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Both are epic poems—lengthy poems that tell of heroes and heroic actions.

The *Iliad* tells of the Trojan War, a struggle between the Greeks and Trojans. In the poem, Paris, the son of Troy's king, falls in love with Helen, wife of the Greek king Menelaus. Paris then carries Helen off to Troy. By doing this, he causes the Trojan War. Menelaus swears vengeance. Through alliances, he assembles a force of 1,000 ships and 100,000 men. For this reason, Helen becomes known as "the face that launched a thousand ships." The action of the *Iliad* takes place after Troy has been under siege for ten years. (In a siege, an army surrounds a city and tries to force it to surrender.) The poem focuses on the Greek and Trojan heroes and their deeds. It is tragic in nature.

One of the most famous incidents involves the Trojan Horse. Left outside the gates of Troy, this huge wooden horse housed 100 Greek warriors. The rest of the Greek warriors boarded their ships. They left the harbor but did not set sail for home. Instead, they hid close by.

The Trojans were tricked. Thinking that the horse was an offering of peace, they took



it into the city. Then they celebrated the end of the war. When the Trojans were finally asleep, the Greek soldiers left their hiding place. They signaled the rest of their army to return. Because of the trick, the Greek army slaughtered the Trojans and destroyed Troy. More than 2,000 years later, a common saying referring to this trick is still in use. "Beware of Greeks bearing gifts" suggests that things—like the great wooden horse—are not always what they seem.

The hero of the *Odyssey* is Odysseus, who also is one of the Greek heroes of the *Iliad*. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus and his men have many adventures on their return from the Trojan War. They fight a one-eyed giant. They encounter the Keeper of the Winds, who gives them a bag filled with favorable winds. An enchantress changes all but Odysseus into pigs—and then changes them back again. They visit Hades, the place of the dead. After a hurricane destroys his ship and crew, Odysseus is held captive for seven years. And when he finally returns home, he finds that his troubles are not

HISTORY MAKERS: HOMER CONTINUED

yet over! Greedy men had invaded his home and tried to marry his wife. Today we still use the word *odyssey*. It means a wandering or quest, often one with many adventures.

Homer's poems were part of an oral tradition. Before written language was developed, bards sang or recited poems and stories. Epic poems were long, so bards often used stock phrases, which helped them memorize the poems. In other words, they introduced common elements, such as the words of the hero, in the same way. They also repeated parts of the poem as a refrain. This technique is still used in many modern poems and popular songs.

In ancient Athens, reading the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* was an important part of a schoolboy's education. Students wrote out and memorized various passages. They often acted out scenes. They discussed the poems' heroes and why they acted the way they did.

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* may have been told and retold for several hundred years before being written down. This may explain why some dialects, or ways of speaking, used in the poems are from different time periods. Some scholars believe that more than one person may have written the poems.

The Trojan War Scholars believe that the Greeks of Homer's time accepted his poems as history. While the *Odyssey* is too fantastic to be based on real events, the *Iliad* appears to be at least partly historic. The city of Troy actually existed and was located in northeastern Asia Minor.

For centuries, historians thought Troy was a product of Homer's imagination. But a German named Heinrich Schliemann disagreed. He was convinced that Troy had existed at one time. In 1870 he searched for and discovered the ancient city in what is now Turkey. He also found that Troy had been built on even older cities. Archaeologists eventually discovered that nine cities had been built on the site. Troy was somewhere in the middle.

The Trojan War also appears to have had

a historic basis, although its cause was not the kidnapping of a queen. Instead, the war seems to have been caused by control over trade routes.

Homer's Influence Homer's poems have influenced other writers for centuries. The Roman poet Virgil used the *Odyssey* as the basis for his epic poem the *Aeneid*. His hero, Aeneas, was inspired by Odysseus. The *Aeneid* glorified Roman values and became the national epic of Rome.

As late as the twentieth century, major works of poetry and fiction have borrowed elements from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. These include the novels *Don Quixotic* by the Spanish writer Cervantes and *Ulysses* (another name for Odysseus) by Irish writer James Joyce. The Italian Renaissance poet Dante was indirectly influenced by Homer through the works of other writers. Recently, the *Odyssey* was modernized in the film *Brother, Where Art Thou*, and the Trojan War was the subject of the movie *Troy*.

Review Questions

1. What story does the *Iliad* tell?
2. How does the *Odyssey* continue the story of the *Iliad*?
3. What is an epic poem?

Critical Thinking

4. **Summarizing** What are the characteristics of Homer's epic poems?
5. **Making Inferences** Why were Homer's poems part of a schoolboy's education in ancient Greece?
6. **Recognizing Changing Interpretations of History** Once scholars believed that neither the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey* had any basis in fact. What caused them to change their minds about the *Iliad*?