

# HOMER'S WORLD

The acropolis of Athens, Greece, was the high point of the city and a place to worship the goddess Athena, the city's patroness.

## Examining the Homeric Epics

Composed in Greece around 750–725 B.C., the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are perhaps the greatest masterpieces of the epic form, narrative poetry about a hero's adventures. Both stories were first told orally, perhaps even sung, and it may not have been until several generations later that these traditional stories were set down in writing. The poems are traditionally credited to a blind poet named Homer. Although there have been many translations of the poems into English, Robert Fitzgerald's verse renderings are considered among the best at capturing the poems' high drama and intense emotions. Three important elements of the plot of each epic are the Trojan War, the heroism of Odysseus, and the interference of the gods.

**The Trojan War** This legendary war seems to have occurred sometime around 1200 B.C. The earliest literary accounts of it, found in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, are elaborated in later classical literature.

According to legend, the Trojan War began after Paris, a Trojan prince, kidnapped the beautiful Helen from her husband, Menelaus (mĕn'ə-lā'əs), the king of Sparta. Menelaus recruited kings and soldiers from all over Greece to help him avenge his honor and recover his wife. The Greeks held Troy under siege for ten years.

The *Iliad* takes place during the tenth year of this war. It tells the story of the Greek warrior Achilles and his quarrel with Menelaus' brother Agamemnon, ending with the death and funeral of Paris' brother Hector.



**RL 6** Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of world literature.  
**RL 7** Analyze the representation of a subject or key scene in two different artistic mediums. **RL 9** Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work.

After Hector's death, the Greeks brought the war to an end thanks to the cleverness of Odysseus, ruler of the island of Ithaca. To break the ten-year stalemate, Odysseus thought of a scheme to make the Trojans think that the Greeks had finally given up. He ordered a giant wooden horse to be built and left at the gates of Troy. The Trojans, waking to find it there—without a Greek in sight—assumed that the enemy had fled and left them a peace offering. They took the horse inside the city, only to discover, too late, that it was filled with Greek soldiers and that Troy was doomed.



Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo's *The Procession of the Trojan Horse into Troy*, painted in 1773

**The Heroic Story of Odysseus** The *Odyssey* deals with Odysseus' adventures as he makes his way home from Troy and with events that take place on Ithaca just before and after his return. The first excerpts that you will read depict some of the wanderings of Odysseus after his departure from Troy with a fleet of 12 ships carrying about 720 men. This time his opponents are not military ones. Instead, he encounters various monsters who try to devour him and enchanting women who try to keep him from his wife, Penelope. The final excerpts describe Odysseus' homecoming and his reunion with Penelope and his son, Telemachus. In addition to great strength and courage, what sets Odysseus apart from others is a special quality that has been called his craft or guile: the ingenious tricks he uses to get himself out of difficult situations.

### The Intervention of the Gods and Goddesses

Adding another dimension to the human struggles recounted in Homer's epics are the mythic elements—the conflicts among the gods and goddesses on Mount Olympus (ə-līm'pəs). In Homer's time, most Greeks believed that their gods not only took an active interest in human affairs but also behaved in recognizably

human ways, often engaging in their own trivial quarrels and petty jealousies. For example, Athena, the goddess of war and practical wisdom, supported the Greek cause in the Trojan War and championed Odysseus, while Aphrodite (ăf rə-dī'tē), the goddess of love, sided with Paris and his fellow Trojans. The story of Odysseus' return from Troy contains some notable instances of divine interference. Odysseus has Athena on his side, but he has displeased the gods who were on the side of Troy. Furthermore, as you will see, he angers another god during one of his first adventures and still another later on. As a result, he is forced to suffer many hardships before he manages to return home.

To Homer's audience, the *Odyssey*, with its interfering gods and goddesses and its strange lands and creatures, must have seemed as full of mystery and danger as science fiction and fantasy adventures seem to people today. Just as we can imagine aliens in the next galaxy or creatures created in a laboratory, the ancient Greeks could imagine monsters living just beyond the boundaries of their known world. It was not necessary for them to believe that creatures such as one-eyed giants did exist, but only that they might.



#### Eros

God of love  
(also known  
as Cupid)

#### Aphrodite

Goddess of  
love and  
mother of Eros

#### Apollo

God of music,  
poetry, and  
prophecy

#### Athena

Goddess of war,  
wisdom, and  
cleverness

#### Muses

Daughters of Zeus (three  
shown here), often viewed as  
sources of divine inspiration

Detail of a frieze representing a procession of mythological divinities. Oil on plaster. Chateau de Malmaison et Bois-Preau, Rueil-Malmaison, France. Photo © Gerard Blot/Art Resource, New York.



## Homer: The Epic Poet

**Shadowy Figure** Although the ancient Greeks credited a man named Homer with composing the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, scholars have long debated whether Homer really existed. There are many theories about who Homer may have been and when and where he may have lived. According to ancient accounts, he lived sometime between 900 and 700 B.C., possibly on the island of Chios in the eastern Aegean Sea, and he was blind. Most modern scholars agree that the Homeric poems are the work of one or two exceptionally talented bards—singers who made up their verses as they sang.

**Oral History** Homer's epics are all that remains of a series of poems that told the whole story of the Trojan War. In later centuries, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were memorized by professional reciters, who performed them at religious festivals throughout Greece. They were also the first works read by Greek schoolchildren. By 300 B.C. many slightly different versions of the poems existed, and scholars began to work at restoring them to their original form.

**Models for the Ages** Homer's epics became models for many later writers, including the Roman poet Virgil, who wrote his own epic in Latin. Poets

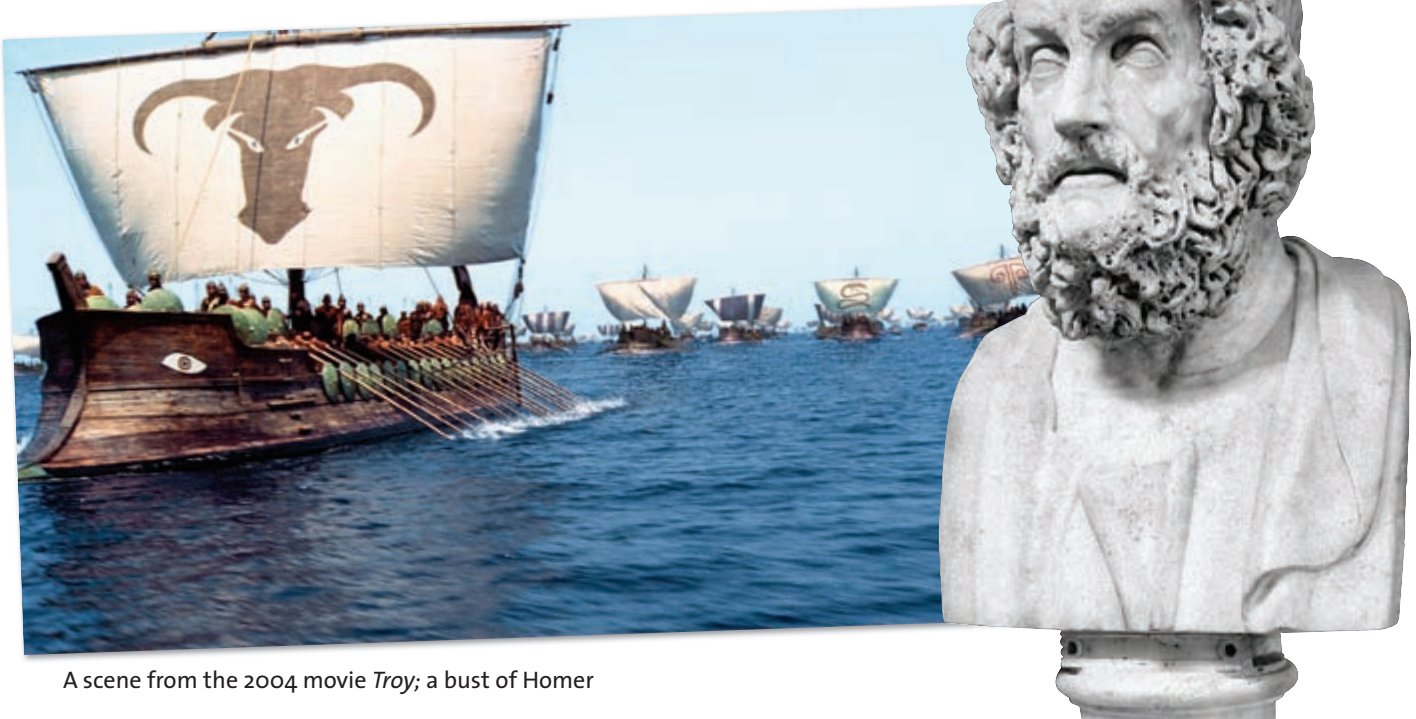
throughout English literature, from Chaucer in the Middle Ages to Shakespeare in the Renaissance to Keats in the Romantic era, have found inspiration in Homer's epics. Moreover, by helping to shape classical Greek culture, the epics contributed to the development of many later Western ideas and values.

**A Living Tradition** Artists of all kinds continue to draw on Homer's work. In 1922, the Irish writer James Joyce published his groundbreaking novel *Ulysses* ("Ulysses" is a Latin form of Odysseus' name), in which he turned a day in the life of an ordinary man into an Odyssean journey. In 2000, the Coen brothers' film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* told the story of a Depression-era Ulysses, an escaped convict returning home to prevent his wife from marrying another man. The 2004 movie *Troy* is a more straightforward adaptation of Homer's *Iliad*.

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A scene from the 2004 movie *Troy*; a bust of Homer

## People and Places of the *Odyssey*

You will find it helpful to become familiar with important people and places in the *Odyssey* before you begin reading. The map identifies real places mentioned in the poem, such as Troy, Sparta, and Ithaca. It also shows where later readers have thought that some of the imaginary lands visited by Odysseus could have been located, after applying Mediterranean geography to Homer's descriptions. Following is a list of important characters. All Greek names used in Robert Fitzgerald's translation have been changed from their original spelling to a more familiar, Latinized spelling.



### IMPORTANT CHARACTERS IN THE *ODYSSEY* (in order of mention)

#### BOOK 1

**Helios** (hē'lē-ōs')—the sun god, who raises his cattle on the island of Thrinacia (thrĭ-nā'shə)

**Zeus** (zōōs)—the ruler of the Greek gods and goddesses; father of Athena and Apollo

**Telemachus** (tə-lēm'ə-kəs)—Odysseus' son

**Penelope** (pə-nēl'ə-pē)—Odysseus' wife

#### BOOK 5

**Hermes** (hūr'mēz)—the god of invention, commerce, and cunning; messenger of the gods

**Calypso** (kə-lĭp'sō)—a sea goddess who lives on the island of Ogygia (ō-gĭj'yə)

**Laertes** (lā-ūr'tēz)—Odysseus' father

#### BOOK 9

**Alcinous** (āl-sĭn'ō-əs)—the king of the Phaeacians (fē-ā'shənz)

**Circe** (sūr'sē)—a goddess and enchantress who lives on the island of Aeaea (ē-ē'ə)

**Cicones** (sĭ-kō'nēz)—allies of the Trojans, who live at Ismarus (ĭs-mār'əs)

**Lotus Eaters**—inhabitants of a land Odysseus visits

**Cyclopes** (sĭ-klō'pēz)—a race of one-eyed giants; an individual member of the race is a Cyclops (sĭ'klōps)

**Apollo** (ə-pōl'ō)—the god of music, poetry, prophecy, and medicine

**Poseidon** (pō-sīd'n)—the god of the seas, earthquakes, and horses; father of the Cyclopes who battles Odysseus

#### BOOK 10

**Aeolus** (ē'ə-ləs)—the guardian of the winds

**Laestrygonians** (lēs'trĭ-gō'nēz)—cannibal inhabitants of a distant land

**Eurylochus** (yūr-lō'kəs)—a trusted officer of Odysseus'

**Persephone** (pər-sēf'ə-nē)—the wife of Hades, ruler of the underworld

**Tiresias** (tĭ-rē'sē-əs) of Thebes (thēbz)—a blind prophet whose spirit Odysseus visits in the underworld

#### BOOK 11

**Elpenor** (ēl-pē'nôr)—one of Odysseus' crew, killed in an accident

#### BOOK 12

**Sirens** (sĭ'rənz)—creatures, part woman and part bird, whose songs lure sailors to their death

**Scylla** (sĭl'ə)—a six-headed sea monster who devours sailors

**Charybdis** (kə-rĭb'dĭs)—a dangerous whirlpool personified as a female sea monster

#### BOOK 16

**Athena** (ə-thē'nə)—the goddess of war, wisdom, and cleverness; goddess of crafts

**Eumaeus** (yūr-mē'əs)—a servant in Odysseus' household

#### BOOK 17

**Argos** (är'gōs)—Odysseus' dog

#### BOOKS 21–23

**Antinous** (än-tĭn'ō-əs)—a suitor of Penelope's

**Eurymachus** (yūr-rĭm'ə-kəs)—a suitor of Penelope's

**Philoetius** (fĭ-lē'shəs)—a servant in Odysseus' household

**Amphinomus** (äm-fĭn'ə-məs)—a suitor of Penelope's

**Eurynome** (yūr-rĭn'ə-mē)—a female servant in Odysseus' household

**Eurycleia** (yūr'ĭ-klē'ə)—an old female servant, still loyal to Odysseus

## The *Odyssey* in Art

Artists have been representing images and events from the *Odyssey* since the seventh century B.C., when Greek artists painted Odyssean images and scenes as decoration on ceramic urns and vases. Since then, artists have continued to tell Odysseus' story in painting, sculpture, and other media.

Throughout the unit, you will see how numerous artists have interpreted this epic in a range of styles and forms. As you look at the art illustrating each episode, ask yourself what the artists were trying to show about each part of the story and what their own attitudes toward characters and events may have been.

**Looking at Art** You've seen how understanding a writer's craft can help you appreciate the beauty and meaning of a literary text. In the same way, knowing about artists' techniques can help you understand and appreciate their work. The following list of terms and related questions may help you identify and think about the choices each artist made. Consider how these choices have contributed to the meaning and beauty of each piece.

Term	Questions
<b>composition</b>	What shape or space is emphasized?
<b>material</b>	Has the artist used paint, clay, pencil, ink, or some other material?
<b>function</b>	Is the piece useful, decorative, or both?
<b>color</b>	Does the piece have a broad palette (range of colors) or a limited one?
<b>line</b>	Are the lines clean, simple, rough, ornate, or jagged?
<b>shape</b>	Does the piece have large, bold shapes or smaller, more complex ones? Are they geometric or organic (free-form)?
<b>texture</b>	In painting, are the brush strokes distinct or smooth looking? In sculpture or ceramics, is the surface polished or rough?
<b>scale</b>	Does the piece show large things or small ones?
<b>representation</b>	Are the images realistic, stylized, or abstract?

**Landscapes** When you look at a Homeric landscape, ask questions like the ones that follow. See if the answers help you understand each artist's purpose.

- Which of the following two landscapes is more **realistic**? How so?
- What **material** has each artist used? Which do you prefer, and why?
- Look at the **composition** of each piece. What part of the scene is emphasized in the painting? What is emphasized in the collage?
- Describe the **mood** and **tone** of each piece. Which is more lush, and which is more spare? Consider the techniques that created these differences.



**200s:** *Ulysses and the Sirens*, Roman. Mosaic, 130 cm x 344 cm. Musée du Bardo, Tunis, Tunisia. © Bridgeman Art Library.



**About 1650:** *Ulysses Returns Chryseis to Her Father*, Claude Lorraine. Oil painting.



**Portraiture** As you look at a portrait, ask yourself what the image suggests about the character or characters being depicted. Try to identify the techniques that helped the artist create that impression.

- What does the **position** of the characters tell you about the scene rendered in terra cotta?
- Consider the difference in **dimension** between the two pieces; one is flat, while the other is in **relief**. How does that difference affect the feel of each piece?
- The pastel drawing is a highly **abstract** figure, as opposed to a realistic one. What do you think of it? Why might an artist choose such an abstract style?



About 460–450 B.C.: Terra cotta plaque showing the return of Odysseus



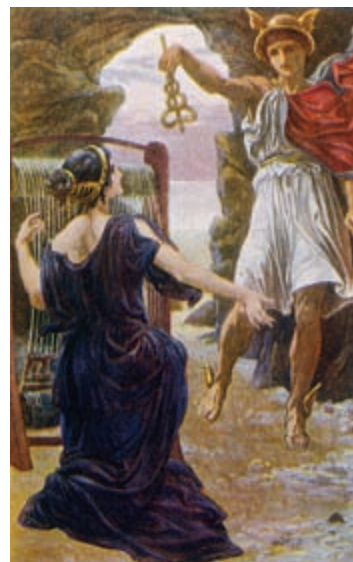
1931–1932: *Ulysses*, Georges Braque. Pastel drawing.

**Narrative Art** Most of the artwork in this selection tells a story in one way or another. Consider how the artist's choices of what to include and emphasize affect your sense of the events portrayed in each work. Compare and contrast how these events are presented in visual form with how they are presented in the text.

- One of the following pieces is a decorative scene painted on a useful object, and the other is a book illustration. How does each piece's **function** affect its **style**?
- Compare the **backgrounds** on which the two scenes are painted. How does each background affect the way you view and understand the scene?
- Which scene makes more sense to you? Explain.



About 450–440 B.C.: Clay urn showing Odysseus slaying Penelope's suitors



About 1915: Illustration from *Tales of the Gods and Heroes* by Sir G. W. Cox, Innes Fripp. Hermes, messenger of Zeus, urges the nymph Calypso to release Odysseus.