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English I – Unit 9: The Odyssey

Homer and Epic Poetry



What is the first thing you think of when you hear the name "Homer"?

A cartoon character? A home run? 10 ephahs? The American painter of seascapes? A Canadian city?

Since the end of the Middle Ages, and in many places well before that, the name "Homer" conjured up the image of the great poet of Ionia, in ancient Greece. Homer was a distinct figure: blind, bearded, and lean. More importantly, he composed two of the three major epic poems of Classical antiquity.

Did you know?

The third major epic, *The Aeneid*, was written by the Roman poet Virgil in 19 B.C. In it, the Trojan hero Aeneas escapes the sacking of Troy, goes on a series of great adventures, and eventually establishes the city of Rome.

Take a look at the book you will be reading for this unit. He would have had that memorized. And that is the shorter of his two poems.


A great man of unquestionable genius, Homer would carry the weight of writing two of the most important works in literature, not to mention holding one of the most celebrated ancient cultures together with his poetry.

Unfortunately we can't be sure about any of this.

Objectives

- Examine the figure of Homer and identify what is known and unknown about him.
- Identify the characteristics and importance of epic poetry.

Vocabulary

	antiquity	the time period prior to the Middle Ages; the classical antiquity of Greece and Rome
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epic

a long narrative poem recounting the life and works of a heroic or mythological person or group of persons whose actions significantly influence their societies



muse

any of nine goddesses in Greek mythology who guard music, poetry, and other arts and sciences and inspire those who choose these as their professions

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Question #1 Matching

Match the terms to their definition.

1. antiquity

☐ the time period prior to the Middle Ages; the classical antiquity of Greece and Rome

2. epic

☐ a long narrative poem recounting the life and works of a heroic or mythological person or group of persons whose actions significantly influence their societies

3. muse

☐ any of nine goddesses in Greek mythology who guard music, poetry, and other arts and sciences and inspire those who choose these as their professions

The Real Homer

No one knows for sure who Homer was, what he was like, or even if he ever existed. Our picture of him is from a Roman sculpture. That sculpture is a copy of a Greek sculpture. The Greek sculpture most likely was made at least 400 years after Homer would have lived.

The Blind Bard

Tradition says Homer was blind because for a very long time, everyone writing about him assumed he was blind. Blind men in ancient Greece were not good for war, so some of them made a living by reciting poetry. There is also a description of a blind poet in *The Odyssey* that many think refers to the poet talking about himself.

Modern scholars have found some problems with this tradition. First of all, there's not much hard evidence to go on. The earliest writing we have *about* Homer claims he lived 400 years before it was written. This means there is no reliable biographical information from Homer's own age. Furthermore, we cannot be sure that both poems were written by the same person, nor even that either poem was written by an "author" in the way that we think of authors today. These issues and doubts have produced a number

of different theories about Homer. Let's look at a few of the most popular.

The Community Homers

Most people agree that the stories about the Trojan War were passed down the generations through oral tradition, that is, poets recited them. Some scholars consider it highly unlikely that the Greeks had the same written language at the time of the Trojan War as Homer used to tell about it. Before writing came along, stories were passed down by poets that recited songs and stories from memory at banquets and special occasions. A poet would learn the stories from older poets and would in turn teach them to younger poets.

Of course, as the stories were passed down, they were changed. A poet that found a certain passage boring would probably skip it or make it shorter. Favorite parts would be expanded and details would be added. By reciting memorized chunks of stories, and filling the gaps by improvising, a bard could recite an epic poem the length of the *Odyssey*.



"Homer and his Guide" by
William-Adolphe Bouguereau

Did you know?

The first scholars to study Homer started in about 400 B.C. in the city of Alexandria. They compiled an "official" version of the poems, which is what our translations are based on. Before this, there were many different versions of Homer's poems being circulated. None of these scholars seems to have questioned whether Homer was the legitimate author of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.

One theory puts Homer at the end of this tradition. At some point, someone wrote the stories of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* down. In this sense, this person would be "the author" of the poems. It is unlikely, however, that he entirely made up these stories. Homer may have actually written the poems down, but if he was blind, that seems unlikely. He also might have recited them from memory and had someone else write them.

Another theory is that Homer recited shorter versions of the poem, and later writers embellished them. In the late 1800s, it was fashionable to study folk ballads. These ballads were said to reflect the genius of cultures, not just single authors. This theory holds that the content of the poems was a number of different songs, possibly from different poets. These songs were combined and written down later. This theory is not as widely accepted as it once was.

Some claim that Homer's two poems cannot be the work of the same man. Two prominent scholars even raise the possibility that *The Odyssey* was written by a Sicilian woman. Others think both poems were written by Nausicaa, a woman you will read about in *The Odyssey*.

Another theory is that, in Hebrew, Homer's name spelled backwards is another form of the name of the biblical author Solomon, making him a candidate.

What we do know is, as of now, all of these theories explain some things and do not explain others. No one knows for sure who wrote what. Many of these problems are problems for many other ancient texts. It is really impossible to know for sure who wrote them. What we do know is that there is a poem in a book that we read. We say it was written by Homer—whether Homer was a man, a woman, a man and a

woman, two men, or a whole culture.

Homer, by the way, gave all the credit to "the *muse*." We will discuss that later.

Question #2MultipleSelect

What do we know for sure about Homer? Select all that apply.

- ☐ He was from Ionia.
- ☐ The scholars at Alexandria treated him as a single poet who wrote *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.
- ☐ "He" was really a woman named Nausicaa.
- ☐ He was blind.
- ☐ We know that someone—individually or collectively—wrote *The Odyssey*.
- ☐ A good deal of controversy surrounds the poet's identity.

Question #3MultipleChoice

Which of the following best describes how epic poetry can emerge from oral tradition?

- ☐ An illiterate poet makes up a song and someone else writes it down.
- ☐ Stories are created and adapted from tradition, with individual poets changing parts of the story to suit their needs. Eventually, someone writes the story down.
- ☐ An epic poem is written. Professional poets memorize the poems, and travel from city to city, reciting them to illiterate crowds.
- ☐ None of the above—epic poetry cannot be adapted from oral tradition.

Question #4MultipleChoice

Which of the following is *not* an answer to the question "Who was Homer?" discussed in the preceding passage?

- ☐ Homer was an ancient Greek king.
- ☐ Homer was really the biblical author Solomon.
- ☐ Homer was really a woman named Nausicaa.
- ☐ Homer was a blind man.
- ☐ Homer was an illiterate poet.

The Epic - Oral and Written Traditions

Today we call a lot of things "epic." Three-hour movies are epic. Twelve minute songs are too. A number of novels are considered epic as well. TV mini-series are advertised as such. The term applies to many things that deal at length with subject matter people consider serious and important.

Oral and Written Traditions

Before movies or music recordings, the epic was a specific genre of poetry. Epics are long poems, but not all long poems are epics. Epics are usually important to the culture that created them. Many ancient cultures have at least one major epic poem.

Did you know?

The ancient civilization of Mesopotamia produced the oldest known written epic—*Gilgamesh*. The longest epic is *The Epic of King Gesar* from Tibet. It is over 25 times as long as *The Odyssey*.

We think that many of the ancient epics were made in the same way as *The Odyssey*. Legends were passed down as oral stories. When written language was developed in the culture, someone used it to write the stories down. Except in rare cases, ancient epics do not have "authors" in the way that we think of them today.

Cultures with established written languages also produced epics. These look very much like ancient epics, but are made differently. Virgil's *Aeneid*, for example was a written work from the start. The Romans already had a written language when he produced the work. Virgil did not write down oral stories—he made up his own. Virgil was an author in the modern sense.

Question #5 MultipleChoice

***The Lusiads* is a Portuguese epic written by Luis De Camoes in the 16th century. It is a mythical account of the expansion of the Portuguese empire. The Portuguese have had a written language since the ninth century. Which poem does *The Lusiads* most resemble?**

- ☐ *The Aeneid*
☐ *The Odyssey*

The Epic - Features and Conventions

Epic Features

Both kinds of epics have some or most of the following characteristics:

- The main character is "epic." He (or she) may or may not have descended from the gods but is always larger than life. The epic hero is faster, stronger, and smarter than real people.
- The subject matter is relevant to the culture that produced it. National epics, for example, typically end with the establishment of a nation. You will see that *The Odyssey* deeply reflects the culture that produced it.
- The hero visits an unreal or supernatural world that most people do not have access to. Often it is an underworld or land of the dead.
- Epics also usually involve some sort of resurrection. A hero may rise from the dead or suddenly return after having been given up for dead.

Epic Conventions

Epics also usually follow a set of conventions or rules. These conventions are called epic machinery. Here are a few of them.

Keep in mind . . .

Most epics do not follow all of these conventions, but most epics contain most of them. You will be looking for examples of these as you read *The Odyssey*.

Invocation. An epic poem usually begins by calling for divine inspiration with an invocation of a muse or similar divinity. The muse is then typically directed to a starting point for the story.

In *The Aeneid*, Virgil invokes the muse:

O Muse! the causes and the crimes relate;
What goddess was provok'd, and whence her hate;
For what offense the Queen of Heav'n began
To persecute so brave, so just a man;
Involv'd his anxious life in endless cares,
Expos'd to wants, and hurried into wars!
Can heav'nly minds such high resentment show,
Or exercise their spite in human woe?

(from Virgil's *Aeneid*, translated by John Dryden, 1631-1700)

Here, Virgil is asking the muse to tell the story so he can write it down. It is not the poet telling the story, but a divine authority. By invoking the muse, the poet channeled the divine source of knowledge into an epic poem. It is difficult to know how seriously different poets took this concept.

Argument. The argument states the theme, or in simple terms: what the poem is about. For example, Homer's theme in *The Iliad* is of the wrath of Achilles. He states this right after invoking the muse.

Here's an example of a statement of theme from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, written in the 1600s.

Of Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal tast
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,
With loss of EDEN, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat,
Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top
Of OREB, or of SINAI, didst inspire
That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed,
In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth
Rose out of CHAOS:

The subject matter of the poem is clearly stated: The poem is about the biblical story of Adam and Eve's loss of Eden. Notice that Milton combines the argument with his invocation of the muse on line 6. In many epics, the two are combined.

Epic Catalogue. This convention includes one or more huge listings of arms, ships, or participants in an important event. Some think that epic catalogues began as a way for oral bards to take a breather in the middle of reciting the poems.

Key point!

As you read *The Odyssey*, you will notice that Odysseus is treated objectively. Homer gives us his faults as clearly as his virtues. This is typical of epics—especially ancient ones.

In Medias Res. Latin for "in the middle of things," this is where an epic typically begins. Past events are often recited as flashbacks as the epic progresses.

Divine Intervention. In most epics, a god, goddess, or lesser divinity will assist (or resist) the hero in some way. Often many divinities are involved.

Epic Similes. Epics contain extended similes which, like "regular" similes, describe one thing in terms of

another. In English, similes use *like* or *as* to make the comparison. A regular simile would be something like: "The two foes drew towards each other like gathering storm clouds." An epic simile would take that same simile and do what epics always do—make it bigger and grander. Notice how *Paradise Lost* uses an epic simile to describe the same battle scene:

Each cast at th' other, as when two black Clouds
With Heav'ns Artillery fraught, come rattling on
Over the CASPIAN, then stand front to front
Hov'ring a space, till Winds the signal blow
To joyn thir dark Encounter in mid air:
So frownd the mighty Combatants, that Hell
Grew darker at thir frown, so matcht they stood.

Here we see the battle between Death and Satan in hell being compared to two black storm clouds. This device helps Milton convey the "epic" size of the battle, and the presence of the supernatural combatants.

Epic Language. Epics have their own language. Homer in his original Greek was understood by most people, but people did not speak like Homer wrote. Epic language is elevated, formal, and exalted. You can see this in the above examples.



Enduring Quality. Most importantly, however, an epic must be very, very good. We do not call long narratives that try and fail to be epics *epic*. The epic writer must demonstrate a deep knowledge about a great number of things. He or she must "capture the essence" of a culture or nation, as well as demonstrate a profound understanding of human nature.

Question #6 MultipleChoice

Which of the following most accurately describes the use of epic machinery in epic poetry?

- ☐ The conventions of epic machinery only apply to European epic poetry.
- ☐ All epics, by definition, must contain all the elements of epic machinery.
- ☐ Epic poetry from all cultures contains at least some of the conventions of epic machinery, but very rarely all of them.

Question #7 MultipleChoice

What is the following an example of?

O LOVE, my queen and goddess, come to me;

My soul shall never cease to worship thee;
Come pillow here thy head upon my breast,
And whisper in my lyre thy softest, best,
And sweetest melodies of bright *Sami*,

Ishtar and Izdubar, translated by Leonidas Le Cenci Hamilton, 1884

- ☐ Invocation
- ☐ Argument
- ☐ Epic Simile
- ☐ Epic Catalogue

Question #8 Multiple Choice

What is the following an example of?

Achilles was still in full pursuit of Hector, as a hound chasing a fawn which he has started from its covert on the mountains, and hunts through glade and thicket. The fawn may try to elude him by crouching under cover of a bush, but he will scent her out and follow her up until he gets her—even so there was no escape for Hector from the fleet son of Peleus. Whenever he made a set to get near the Dardanian gates and under the walls, that his people might help him by showering down weapons from above, Achilles would gain on him and head him back towards the plain, keeping himself always on the city side.

The Iliad, translated by Samuel Butler (1835-1902)

- ☐ Invocation
- ☐ Argument
- ☐ Epic Simile
- ☐ Epic Catalogue

Question #9 Multiple Choice

What is the following an example of?

Full many a wonder is told us in stories old, of heroes worthy of praise, of hardships dire, of joy and feasting, of the fighting of bold warriors, of weeping and of wailing; now ye may hear wonders told.

- ☐ Invocation
- ☐ Argument
- ☐ Epic Simile
- ☐ Epic Catalogue

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