

HOMERIC EPICS—SUMMARY

ANCIENT GREECE—THE ILIAD AND ODYSSEY TROJAN WAR TO RETURN OF ODYSSEUS

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.

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.



HIS OLD NURSE RECOGNIZED THE SCAR ON HIS FOOT.

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.