

Epic Poetry: The Iliad and The Odyssey

Academus Easter Crash Course 2021

What is Epic Poetry?



A Reading from Homer (1885) by Lawrence Alma-Tadema

An [Epic poem](#) is a lengthy narrative which usually depicts events that occurred before a culture's living memory, recalling extraordinary deeds of heroes dealing with supernatural forces.

Our word 'epic' is derived from Ancient Greek 'epos' which means either a word, a story, or a poem.

In Ancient Greece, an Epic could refer to all poetry written in [dactylic hexameter](#), this includes the work of ancient poets [Homer](#), [Hesiod](#), the recorded words of the [Delpic Oracle](#), and [Orphic verses](#). The most famous ancient Greek Epics are the two surviving works attributed to Homer: [The Iliad](#) and [the Odyssey](#).

Oral Tradition

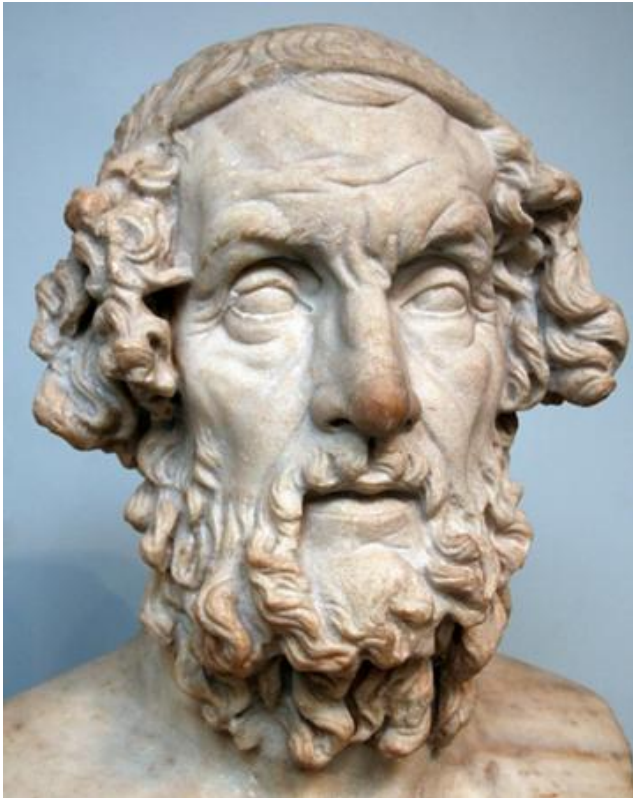


Although [the Iliad](#) and [the Odyssey](#) have been available in written form as manuscripts since the Classical age, originally both the Epics were transmitted across the ancient world by [oral tradition](#).

[Oral tradition](#) is a form of communication where ideas, knowledge, and art, are preserved through story telling from generation to generation. The work of Classical scholars has determined that [Homer's](#) poems were originally constructed this way before they were codified into the text we have now.

This is evidenced by the use of stock phrases and formulaic expressions and repetition of important sections which would have aided the bard in remembering and performing the poems.

Who is Homer?



2nd century CE Roman Marble bust of Homer

Homer is the name given to the author of [the Iliad](#), [the Odyssey](#), and a number of other Epics that do not survive. By the Classical era, Homer's life had been mythologised. There was a widespread belief that Homer was a blind bard from [Ionia](#) who composed his poems with divine inspiration from the [Muses](#).

His exact date and place of birth was unknown even in antiquity, although a clan of people from the island of [Chios](#) were named the '[Homeridae](#)', meaning 'sons of Homer', claimed descent from the great poet.

However, debate exists as to whether the Homeridae were genuinely descendants of Homer himself. The name could also be derived from '[homeros](#)', the ancient Greek for 'hostage', and so the [Homeridae](#) could also refer to the clan being the descendants of individuals who were originally brought to Chios as hostages. Equally, the 'Homeridae' can refer not just to a family of people, but to a group of rhapsodes or professional poem performers.

The Homeric Question



Homer and his Guide (1874) by William-Adolphe Bouguereau

Because of the ambiguous nature of the details of [Homer's](#) life, and the existence of oral tradition, many people question whether [Homer](#) is indeed a real person at all.

'[The Homeric Question](#)' is the name given to the debate in scholarship over whether the [Iliad](#) and [Odyssey](#) represent the work of a single author or whether Homer represents a conceptual author and is a convenient name assigned to a body of literary work that was created over generations by various storytellers which eventually amalgamated into one single story.

The two sides of this debate are known in scholarship as '[unitarians](#)' and '[analysts](#).' Unitarians believe Homer to be a single poet and that the two Epic poems show an artistic unity which suggest they were written at one time by a single hand. Analysts believe that the poems were composed by many hands over several generations and that parts of the [Iliad](#) and [Odyssey](#) may have been composed by different poets.

The Epic Cycle



Death mask, known as the Mask of Agamemnon, Grave Circle A, Mycenae. 16th century BCE.

The key story that formed the bulk of Ancient Greek Epic revolved around the [Trojan War](#). The [Iliad](#) and the [Odyssey](#) are only two surviving works to detail this conflict and its aftermath, we know of several others that told stories regarding particular aspects of this major event although those do not survive. Lost works from the Epic Cycle include the [Cypria](#), the [Aethiopis](#), the [Little Iliad](#), the [Iliou Persis](#), the [Nostoi](#), and the [Telegony](#).

While the historicity of [Troy](#) is still a matter for debate, some scholars and archaeologists of the past have believed it existed. [The Trojan War](#), if it did occur, occurred some time in the [Mycenaean](#) period, prior to the [Bronze Age Collapse](#). For this reason, items that were discovered pertaining to this era of history were often associated with the mythical [Trojan War](#).

The Iliad



Achilles tending Patroclus wounded by an arrow, Attic red-figure kylix, c. 500 BCE.

The [Iliad](#) is the earlier of the two surviving Epics, composed of 24 books. The name Iliad is taken from [Ilium](#), another name for the city of [Troy](#). The [Iliad](#) does not tell the complete story of the [Trojan War](#), but starts in medias res, picking up in the 9th year of a 10 year war. The conflict that the [Iliad](#) specifically deals with [Achilles'](#) quarrel with the King [Agamemnon](#) after Achilles' feels disrespected by Agamemnon after the king claims a slave girl named [Briseis](#) who had previously belonged to Achilles. In response to this, Achilles' refuses to fight in the war, despite being prophesised to be a necessity for the war to be won. The Iliad details the impact and aftermath of [Achilles'](#) decisions, starting with the conflict with [Agamemnon](#) and leading to his confrontation with Trojan prince [Hector](#).

[The Iliad](#) deals with dozens of characters and their role within this war. Themes of [the Iliad](#) include the quest for glory and honour, the horrors of war, and the quest for reconciliation.

Helen: Villain or Victim?

Helen of Troy
(1867) by
Frederick
Sandys-Walker



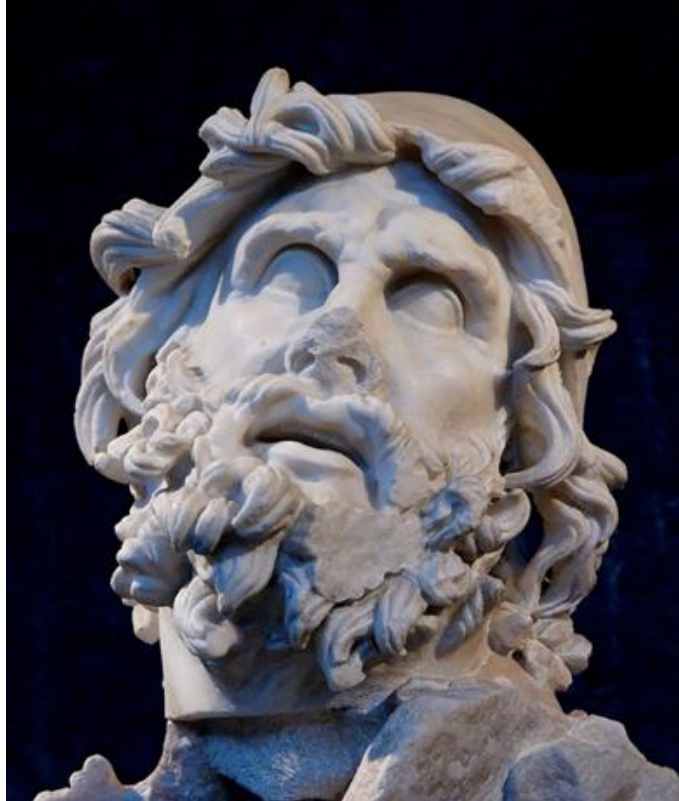
'Oh, if only vile death had been my choice when I came here with your son, leaving behind the house of my marriage and my family and my darling child and the sweet company of friends! But this did not happen, and so I am wasted with weeping'

Iliad 5.173.

'But come now... and sit here on this chair, since it is your mind more than any that the war's work besets, all for the sake of the bitch that I am and the blind folly of Alexandros'

Iliad 6. 357.

The Odyssey



Marble head of Odysseus, 1st century AD.

The [Odyssey](#) picks up the story of [Odysseus](#), king of [Ithaca](#), long after the [Trojan War](#) has finished. Much like the *Iliad*, the [Odyssey](#) is also composed of 24 books and is similar in that it begins several years into the story at hand. After the Greeks were victorious at [Troy](#), all the surviving kings attempted to return home. Odysseus was particularly unfortunate as his journey home would take an additional 10 years.

Over the course of this journey [Odysseus](#) has many magical adventures, dealing with several mythological enemies including the goddess [Calypso](#), the witch [Circe](#), the cyclops [Polyphemus](#), the [Sirens](#), the monsters [Scylla and Charybdis](#), and a more human threat in the form of several dozen suitors who have overrun his palace in his absence.

The ultimate purpose of the *Odyssey* is to detail Odysseus' [nostos](#), or return, so that he can take his rightful place as king of [Ithaca](#), husband of [Penelope](#), and father of [Telemachus](#).

Odysseus: An Atypical Hero?



'Odysseus and Polyphemus' (1896) by Arnold Böcklin

'Tell me about a complicated man. Muse, tell me how he wandered and was lost when he had wrecked the holy town of Troy, and where he went, and who he met, the pain he suffered in the storms at sea, and how he worked to save his life and bring his men back home... Now goddess, child of Zeus, tell the old story for our modern times. Find the beginning'

Odyssey, 1.1.