

The *Odyssey*

An Introduction by David Adams Leeming

Almost three thousand years ago, people who lived in the starkly beautiful parts of the world we now call Greece were telling stories about a great war. The person credited with later gathering all these stories together and telling them as one unified epic is a man named Homer (Hemēros, in Greek). Homer's great war stories are called, in English, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. (In Greek the *Iliad* is *Ilias* and the *Odyssey* is *Odysseia*).

Homer's stories probably can be traced to historical struggles for control of the waterway leading from the Aegean Sea to the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea. These real battles would have taken place as early as 1200 B.C.—a time that was at least as long ago for Homer's audience as the Pilgrims' landing at Plymouth Rock is for us.

Homer's first epic was the *Iliad*, which tells of a ten-year war fought on the plains outside the walls of a great city called Troy (also known as Ilium). The ruins of Troy can still be seen in western Turkey. In Homer's story the Trojan War was fought between the people of Troy and an alliance of Greek kings (at that time each island and area of the Greek mainland had its own king). The *Iliad* tells us that the cause of the war was sexual jealousy: The world's most beautiful woman, Helen, abandoned her husband, Menelaus, a Greek king, and ran off with Paris, a prince of Troy.

The *Odyssey*, Homer's second epic, is the story of one Greek soldier, Odysseus, to get home after the Trojan War. All epic poems in the Western world owe something to the basic patterns established by these two stories.

EPICS AND VALUES

Epics are long narrative poems that tell of the adventure of heroes who in some way embody the values of their civilizations. The Greeks for centuries used the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in schools to teach Greek virtues. So it is not surprising that later cultures that admired the Homeric epics created their own epics, imitating Homer's style but conveying their own value systems.

Still, for all the epics written since Homer's time and for all the ones composed before it, when we think of the word epic, we think primarily of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Rome's *Aeneid*, France's *Song of Roland*, Italy's *Divine Comedy*, the ancient Sumerian tale of Gilgamesh, India's *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, Mali's *Sundiata*—all are great stories in epic tradition. But to discover the heart of that tradition, we need to examine Homer's epics.

The *Iliad* is the primary model for the epic of war. The *Odyssey* is the model for the epic of the long journey. The theme of the journey has been basic in Western literature—it is found in fairy tales, in novels such as *The Incredible Journey*, *Moby Dick*, and *The Hobbit*, and in such movies as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Star Wars*, *The Lion King*, and *Forrest Gump*. Thus, the *Odyssey* has been more widely read of Homer's two great stories.

THE WAR-STORY BACKGROUND: VIOLENCE AND BRUTALITY

The background for Odysseus' story is found in the *Iliad*, which is set in the tenth and final year of the Trojan War. According to the *Iliad*, the Greeks attacked Troy to avenge the insult suffered by Menelaus, king of Sparta, when his wife, Helen, ran off with Paris, a young prince of Troy. The Greek kings banded together under the leadership of Agamemnon, the brother of Menelaus. In a thousand ships, they sailed across the Aegean Sea and encircled the walled city of Troy.

The audience of the *Odyssey* would have known this war story. Listeners would have known that the Greeks were eventually victorious, that they gained entrance to Troy, reduced the city to smoldering ruins, and butchered all the inhabitants, except for those they took as slaves back to Greece. They would have known all about the greatest of the Greek warriors, Achilles, who was to die young in the final year of the war. The audience would probably have heard other epic poems (now lost) that told of the homecomings of the various Greek heroes who survived the war. They would especially have known about the homecoming of Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek forces, who was murdered by his unfaithful wife when he returned from Troy.

Finally, Homer's listeners might well have been particularly fascinated by another homecoming story—this one about a somewhat unusual hero, known as much for his brain as for his brawn. In fact, many legends had already grown up around this hero, whose name was Odysseus. He was the subject of Homer's new epic, the *Odyssey*.

ODYSSEUS: A HERO IN TROUBLE

In Homer's day heroes were thought of as a special class of aristocrats. They were placed somewhere between the gods and ordinary human beings. Heroes experienced pain and death, but they were always sure of themselves, always "on top of the world."

Odysseus is different. He is a hero in trouble. We can relate to Odysseus because we share with him a sense of being somehow lost in a world with difficult choices. Like Odysseus, we have to cope with unfair authority figures. Like him, we have to work very hard to get what we want.

The *Odyssey* is a story marked by melancholy and a feeling of postwar disillusionment. Odysseus was a great soldier in the war, but his war record is not of interest to the monsters that populate his world of wanderings. Even the people of his home island, Ithaca, seem to lack respect for him. It is as if society was saying to the returning hero, "You were a great soldier once—or so they say—but times have changed. This is a difficult world, and we have more important things to think about than your record."

In the years before the great war, Odysseus had married the beautiful and ever-faithful Penelope, one of several very strong women in the man's world of the Greek epic. (One critic, Robert Graves, was so impressed by the unusual importance of women and home and hearth in the *Odyssey* that he believed Homer to be a woman.)

Penelope and Odysseus had one son, Telemachus. He was still a toddler when Odysseus was called by Agamemnon and Menelaus to join them in the war against Troy. But Odysseus was a homebody. He preferred not to go to war, especially a war fought for an unfaithful woman. Even though he was obligated under a treaty to go, Odysseus tried draft-dodging. It is said that when Agamemnon and Menelaus came to fetch him, he pretended to be insane and acted as if he did not recognize his visitors. Instead of entertaining them, he dressed as a peasant and began plowing the field and sowing it with salt. But the "draft board" was smarter than Odysseus. They threw his baby, Telemachus, in front of his oncoming plow. Odysseus revealed his sanity by quickly turning the plow aside to avoid running over his son.

THE WOODEN-HORSE TRICK

Once in Troy, Odysseus performed extremely well as a soldier and commander. It was he, for example, who thought of the famous wooden-horse trick that would lead to the downfall of Troy. For ten years the Greeks had been fighting the Trojans, but they were fighting outside Troy's massive walls. They had been unable to break through the walls and enter the city. Odysseus' plan was to build an enormous wooden horse and hide a few Greek soldiers inside its hollow belly. After the horse was built, the Greeks pushed it up to the gates of Troy and withdrew their armies, so that their camp appeared to be abandoned. Thinking that the Greeks had given up the fight and that the horse was a peace offering, the Trojans brought the horse into their city. That night, the Greeks hidden inside the wooden body came out, opened the gates of Troy to the whole Greek army, and began the battle that was to win the war.

THE ANCIENT WORLD AND OURS

The world of Odysseus was harsh, a world familiar with violence. In a certain sense Odysseus and his men act like pirates on their journey home. They think nothing of entering a town and carrying off all its worldly goods. The "worldly goods" in an ancient city might only have pots and pans and cattle and sheep. The "palaces" the Greeks raided might have been little more than elaborate mud and stone farmhouses. Yet, in the struggles of Odysseus, Penelope, and Telemachus in their "primitive" society that had little in common with the high Athenian culture that would develop several centuries later, there is something that has a great deal to do with us.

A SEARCH FOR THEIR PLACES IN LIFE

Odysseus and his family are people searching for the right relationships with one another and with the people around them. They want to find their proper places in life. It is this theme that sets the tone for the *Odyssey* and determines the unusual way in which the poem is structured.

Instead of beginning at the beginning with Odysseus' departure from Troy, the story begins with his son, Telemachus. Telemachus is now twenty years old. He is threatened by rude, powerful men swarming his own home, pressuring his mother to marry one of them. These men are bent on robbing Telemachus of his inheritance. Telemachus is a young man who needs his father, the one person who can put things right at home.

Meanwhile, we hear that his father is stranded on an island, longing to find a way to get back to his wife, child, and home. It is ten years since Odysseus sailed from Troy, twenty years since he left Ithaca to fight in Troy. While Telemachus is in search of his father, Odysseus is in search of a way out of what we might today call his midlife crisis. He is searching for inner peace, for a way to reestablish a natural balance in his life. The quests of father and son provide a framework for the poem and bring us into it as well—because we all are in search of our real identities, our true selves.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE GODS

This brings us to mythic and religious questions in the *Odyssey*. **Myths** are stories that use fantasy to express ideas about life that cannot be expressed easily in realistic terms. Myths are essentially religious because they are concerned with the relationship between human beings and the unknown or spiritual realm.

As you will see, Homer is always concerned with the relationship between humans and gods. Homer is religious: For him, the gods control all things. Athena, the goddess of wisdom, is always at the side of Odysseus. This is appropriate because Odysseus is known for his mental abilities. Thus, in Homer's stories a god can be an **alter ego**, a reflection of a hero's best or worst qualities. The god who works against Odysseus is Poseidon, the god of the sea, who is known for arrogance and a certain brutishness. Odysseus himself can be violent and cruel, just as Poseidon is.

WHO WAS HOMER?

No one knows for sure who Homer was. The later Greeks believed he was a blind minstrel who came from the island of Chios. Some scholars feel there must have been two Homers; some think he was just a legend. But scholars have also argued about whether a man called Shakespeare ever existed. It is almost as if they were saying that Homer and Shakespeare are too good to be true. On the whole, it seems sensible to take the word of the Greeks themselves. We can at least accept the existence of Homer as a model for a class of wandering bards or minstrels later called rhapsodes.

These **rhapsodes**, or "singers of tales," were the historians and entertainers as well as the myth-makers of their time. There was probably no written history in Homer's day. There were certainly no movies and no television, and the Greeks had nothing like a Bible or a book of religious stories. So it was that the minstrels traveled about from community to community singing of recent events or of the doings of heroes, gods, and goddesses. It is as if the author of the Book of Kings in Bible, the writer of a history of World War II, and a famous pop singer were combined in one person. Homer's people saw no conflict among religion, history, and good fun.

HOW WERE EPICS TOLD?

Scholars have found that oral epic poets are still composing today in Eastern Europe and other parts of the world. These scholars suggest that stories like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were originally told aloud by people who could not read and write. The stories were composed orally according to a basic story line. But most of the actual words were improvised—made up on the spot—in a way that fit a particular rhythm or meter. The singers of these stories had to be very talented, and they had to work very hard. They also needed an audience that could listen closely.

We can see from this why there is so much repetition in the Homeric epics. The oral storyteller, in fact, had a store of formulas for describing the arrival and greeting of guests, the eating of meals, and the taking of baths. He knew formulas

for describing the sea (it is always “wine-dark”) and for describing Athena (she is always “grey-eyed Athena”). Formulas such as these had another advantage: They gave the singer and his audience some breathing time. The audience could relax for a moment and enjoy a familiar and memorable passage, while the singer could think ahead to the next part of his story.

When we think about the audience that listened to these stories, we can also understand the value of the extended comparisons that we call **Homeric** or **heroic similes** today. These similes compare heroic or epic events to simple and easily understandable everyday events—events the audience would recognize instantly. For example, at one point in the *Iliad*, Athena prevents an arrow from striking Menelaus. The singer compares the goddess’s actions to an action that every listener would have been familiar with:

She brushed it away from his skin as lightly as when a mother
Brushes a fly away from her child who is lying in sweet sleep.

Epic poets such as Homer would come to a city and would go through a part of their repertory while there. A story as long as the *Odyssey* (11,300 lines) could not be told at one sitting such as Homer would come to a city and would go through a part of their repertory while there. A story as long as the *Odyssey* (11,300 lines) could not be told at one sitting. We have to assume that if the singer had only a few days in the town, he would summarize some of his story told to us, but that his time is limited. We’ll also assume that the audience, before retiring at the end of each performance, wants to talk about the stories they’ve just heard. You are now part of that audience.

A LIVE PERFORMANCE

What was it like to hear a live performance of the *Odyssey*? We can guess what it was like because there are many instances in the epic itself in which traveling singers appear and sing their tales. In the court of the Phaeacian king, Alcinous in Book 8, for instance, there is a particularly wonderful singer who must make us wonder if the blind Homer is talking about himself. Let’s picture the setting of a performance before we start the story

Imagine a large hall full of people who are freshly bathed, rubbed with fine oils, and draped in clean tunics. Imagine the smell of meat being cooked over charcoal, the sound of voices. Imagine the wine being freely poured, the flickering reflections of the great cooking fires, and the torches that light the room. A certain anticipation hangs in the air. It is said that the blind minstrel Homer is in the city and that he has new stories about that long war in Troy. Will he appear and entertain tonight?