

The Homeric World: Literature



Introduction Booklet

Epic

Ask yourself: what does it mean if you describe something as ‘epic’?

An ancient epic is a long narrative poem, ‘elevated’ in theme and style – ‘elevated’ means the story is about gods and heroes and adventures, it’s not about putting on your socks or doing the washing up, and it uses complex literary devices to make it engaging.

They aren’t just entertainment stories of legendary or historical heroes; they summarize and express the nature or ideals of an entire nation at a significant or crucial period in its history.

Examples of ancient epic poems are the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* by Homer, the *Aeneid* by Virgil, but these are just three of a huge number of stories considered ‘epics.’ [Click on this link to see a full list...](#)

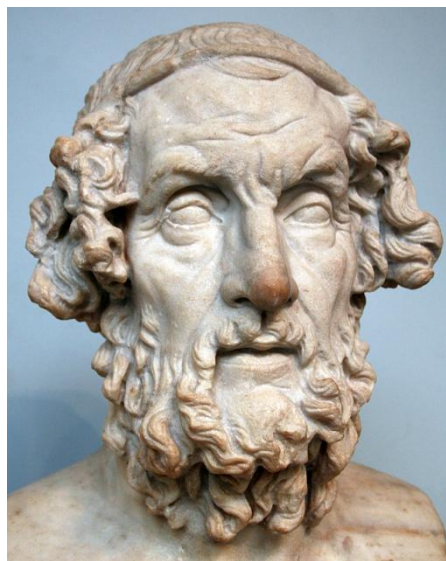
With our focus on ancient Greek epic, specifically parts of Homer’s *Odyssey*, you need to be able to put this particular story into its wider context.

The Epic Cycle.

We only have the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; the rest are lost...

<u>Poem</u>	<u>What it’s about</u>
<i>Cypria</i>	events leading up to the Trojan War including the judgment of Paris between the three goddesses; events of the first 9 years of the war at Troy
<i>Iliad</i>	Achilles’ rage against Agamemnon and Hector prince of Troy, ending with the death of Hector and ransoming of his body to Priam
<i>Aethiopis</i>	Arrival of the Trojan allies, including Penthesileia (Queen of the Amazons) and Memnon (King of Ethiopia), and the death of Achilles
<i>Little Iliad</i>	Events after Achilles’ death, including building of the horse and competition over Achilles’ (won by Odysseus)
<i>Ilioupersis (the sack of Troy)</i>	Destruction of Troy by the Greeks
<i>Nostoi</i>	The returning home of the Greek force and events upon their arrival, including the death of Agamemnon
<i>Odyssey</i>	The end of Odysseus’ voyage home and his revenge on the suitors in his home
<i>Telegony</i>	Odysseus’ voyage to Thesprotia, return to Ithaca and death by his son Telegonus

Homer and *the Odyssey*



We know very little about Homer - we don't even know whether he really existed, or whether the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were in fact written by more than one person. He may simply have been the first one to write down the poems, after they had been passed down through the generations as 'oral poetry,' songs that are learned off by heart through repeated listening.

In any case, the ancient Greeks believed that there was a single poet who had written the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, believed to have lived around 800-750 BC in Chios, an island off the coast of Ionia in Asia Minor (modern Turkey).

Part of Homer's folklore was that he was blind – the story said he was so blessed by the gods with the gift of poetry that in exchange they took away his sight. True? Who knows!

ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, μοῦσα, πολύτροπον

Sing to me, Muse, of that man of many resources

The *Odyssey* is a poem in 24 sections (known as Books). It tells us of the adventures of the hero Odysseus, sailing home after the Trojan war, and about how he managed to reclaim his kingdom of Ithaca on his return. This major war between the Greeks and Trojans had lasted 10 years. Odysseus, despite wishing to stay at home with his wife Penelope and newborn son Telemachus, was bound by a promise he had made to go (remember Year 9 – the oath sworn by all the Greek kings to come to Menelaus' aid if his wife Helen were ever stolen... well, she was stolen by a Trojan).

During his time at Troy, Odysseus was the one to come up with the idea of the wooden horse, by which the Greeks captured Troy. However, his voyage home was not plain sailing: his journey lasts for 10 years, he gets lost and all of his crew members die in horrific circumstances. When he eventually makes it home to the island of Ithaca, he finds a group of men trying to usurp his position and steal his wife, and he must convince his wife that he is the man she married, get to know his now 20 year old son, and take revenge on the men known as the Suitors.

Part of what makes this an interesting story is that Books 9, 10, 11 and 12 are told in flashback from Odysseus' own perspective.

Synopsis of the whole poem

Books 1-4	Odysseus' teenage son Telemachus goes on a voyage to the island of Pylos and to mainland Sparta to find news of his father. All the other Greek heroes have now returned from Troy, but nothing has been heard of Odysseus. He meets Athene and hears stories of his father, but gets no concrete information about his whereabouts or safety.
Books 5-8	Odysseus – who is alone on the island of Ogygia as the guest/prisoner of the beautiful goddess Calypso – is finally released after spending the last 7 years with her. He sails on a raft to the island of Phaeacia, surviving a terrible storm sent by Poseidon which almost kills him.
Books 9-12	The Phaeacians welcome Odysseus warmly and invite him to tell the story of how he reached their shores. Related to the audience in direct speech, Odysseus describes how he had 3 years of adventures with his crew after leaving Troy, meeting hostile forces, cannibals, drug-addicts, a Cyclops, a witch called Circe and the cattle of the sun-god. He miserably explains how his crew died and how only he survived, arriving at Calypso's island 7 years ago.
Books 13-24	The Phaeacians sail Odysseus home to Ithaca and he disguises himself as a beggar, biding his time and waiting to reveal his identity at the right time. He reunites with his son Telemachus and a few slaves. He kills the Suitors who have been living in his home, trying to marry his wife, and reunites with her and his aged father.

The chronology of the poem can be tricky to get your head around – in fact, Books 1-4 and Books 5-8 are happening at the same time: Telemachus sails for news of his father at the same time that Odysseus sails from Ogygia to Phaeacia.

Exam tip: You will not get questions on sections other than the books of the prescribed reading, but reading other books of the Odyssey will aid your understanding of characters and issues. You will be credited for your wider knowledge in the 15 mark questions if you refer to other parts of the poem (although you don't have to in order to gain full marks).

Historical Context

Use the hyperlinks to watch a few videos about each time period and get a sense of its history. The Culture section of your exam, which we will study in Michaelmas term of Year 11, looks at life in Mycenae and Tiryns during the Bronze Age.

Mycenaean (Bronze Age) Greece	Collapse!	Iron Age (Archaic) Greece
1600 BC to 1100 BC – the time period when the Trojan War and events of the Odyssey take place.		1100 BC to 800 BC – the time period when Homer was living and when the Odyssey was composed.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This was a highly affluent period that enjoyed technologically advanced architecture and decorative arts. • It had complex social structures based around kings, palaces, councils of advisors, slaves and freedmen. • Lots of gold, bronze and silver • It was a literate society that used a written language called Linear B • It was fairly aggressively expansionist, trading and communicating with other societies around Greece and the Mediterranean. • Key cities included Knossos, Argos, Sparta, Mycenae, Thebes and Tiryns 	<p>Within a period of just 100 years between 1200 BC and 1100 BC, all the major kingdoms collapsed and were abandoned. This might have been from a natural disaster that crippled Knossos in Crete, leading to a breakdown of the economy everywhere...</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Called ‘the dark ages’ of Greece, societies were not wealthy and did not spend time or money on buildings or decoration. • The overall population dropped; communities were small tribes led by a tribal leader. • Mostly iron tools • This was an illiterate society; with no reason for keeping records, communities lost the ability to write. • Little communication or interaction between tribes: groups were isolated. • No big cities!

Homer was living at the end of the Iron Age, when Greek society was coming out of this slump. His society was becoming literate using the written Phoenician alphabet – which would eventually turn into ancient Greek, then the Latin alphabet... which is what we use. He wrote a story set in the Bronze Age that tells of glorious kings, beautiful queens, fancy clothing and jewellery, when gods walked amongst us and when the warriors had amazing adventures with flashing bronze swords: a time quite unlike the gloomy, grey poverty of the Iron Age.

What to look out for when reading...

Key Themes:

- The guest-host relationship known as **xenia**
- The use of deceit and trickery
- Civilisation vs barbarism
- Revenge and justice
- The concept of returning home, known as **nostos**
- Fate and its impact on characters

12 Narrative Techniques:

1. Direct speech
2. Storytelling
3. Pathos
4. Pace
5. Detail, including **topos** (**topoi**)
6. Gore
7. Sensory language
8. **Dramatic irony**
9. **Similes** and **formulae**
10. **Epithets**
11. Characterization
12. Fantasy

Key Characters:

- Telemachus as son and hero
- Penelope as host and wife
- Circe as host and witch
- Odysseus' slaves on Ithaca
- Odysseus' crew on his journey
- Polyphemus as monster and shepherd
- The gods

Odysseus himself:

- ❖ Intelligence and skill as a speaker
- ❖ Leader
- ❖ Husband
- ❖ Father
- ❖ Warrior
- ❖ 'Hero'
- ❖ His relationship with the gods

The opener – Book 1 lines 1 to 145

This section is not part of your prescribed literature and you will not be asked questions on this section in the exam. However, it sets the scene for the poem and gives you an introduction to some of the main characters and themes that will be important later. Read it carefully and then answer the questions on the next page.

Bk1:1-21 Invocation and Introduction

Tell me, [Muse](#), of that man of many resources, who wandered far and wide, after sacking the holy citadel of [Troy](#). Many the men whose cities he saw, whose ways he learned. Many the sorrows he suffered at sea, while trying to bring himself and his friends back alive. Yet despite his wishes he failed to save them, because of their own un-wisdom, foolishly eating the cattle of Helios, the [Sun](#), so the god denied them their return. Tell us of these things, beginning where you will, Goddess, Daughter of [Zeus](#).

Now, all the others, who had escaped destruction, had reached their homes, and were free of sea and war. He alone, longing for wife and home, [Calypso](#), the Nymph, kept in her echoing cavern, desiring him for a husband. Not even when the changing seasons brought the year the gods had chosen for his return to [Ithaca](#) was he free from danger, and among friends. Yet all the gods pitied him, except [Poseidon](#), who continued his relentless anger against godlike [Odysseus](#) until he reached his own land at last.

Bk1:22-43 Zeus speaks to the Olympians.

Now, though, [Poseidon](#) was visiting the distant [Ethiopians](#), the most remote of all, a divided people, some of whom live where [Hyperion](#) sets the others where he rises, to accept a hetacomb of sacrificial bulls and rams, and there he sat, enjoying the feast: but the rest of the gods had gathered in the halls of [Olympian Zeus](#). The Father of gods and men was first to address them, for he was thinking of flawless [Aegisthus](#), whom far-famed [Orestes](#), [Agamemnon](#)'s son had killed. And, thinking of him, he spoke to the immortals.

'How surprising that men blame the gods, and say their troubles come from us, though they, through their own un-wisdom, find suffering beyond what is fated. Just as [Aegisthus](#), beyond what was fated, took the wife of Agamemnon, son of [Atreus](#), and murdered him when he returned, though he knew the end would be a complete disaster, since we sent [Hermes](#), keen-eyed slayer of [Argus](#), to warn him not to kill the man, or court his wife, as [Orestes](#) would avenge Agamemnon, once he reached manhood and longed for his own land. So Hermes told him, but despite his kind intent he could not move Aegisthus' heart: and Aegisthus has paid the price now for it all.'

BkI:44-95 Athene seeks help for Odysseus.

[Athene](#), the bright-eyed goddess, answered him at once: 'Father of us all, Son of [Cronos](#), Highest King, clearly that man deserved to be destroyed: so let all be destroyed who act as he did. But my heart aches for [Odysseus](#), wise but ill fated, who suffers far from his friends on an island deep in the sea. The island is densely wooded and a goddess lives there, a child of malevolent [Atlas](#), he who knows the depths of the sea, and supports the great columns that separate earth and sky. It is his daughter who detains that unlucky, sorrowful man: she lulls him, always, with soft seductive words, intending him to forget Ithaca. But Odysseus, who yearns for the mere sight of the smoke rising from his own country, only longs to die. Yet, Olympian, your heart is unmoved. Did he win no favour with the sacrifices he made you, by the [Argive](#) ships, on the wide plains of [Troy](#)? Why do you will this man such pain, [Zeus](#)?'

Cloud-Gathering Zeus answered her then: 'My child, what words escape your lips? How could I ever forget godlike Odysseus, who exceeds all mortals in wisdom, and also in sacrifice to the deathless gods who inhabit the broad heavens? It is [Poseidon](#), the Earth-Bearer, who is always filled with implacable anger against him, because of godlike [Polyphemus](#), the strongest [Cyclops](#) of all, whom Odysseus blinded. The nymph [Thoosa](#) bore him, daughter of [Phorcys](#) who rules the barren sea: she slept with Poseidon in the hollow caves. Since that blinding, Poseidon, the Earth-Shaker, though he will not kill him, keeps Odysseus far from his native land. Come, let all here plan how he might come home: then Poseidon will relent, since he'll not be able to contend, alone, against all the deathless gods together.'

The goddess, bright-eyed Athene, answered him: 'Father of us all, Son of [Cronos](#), Highest King, if it truly pleases the blessed gods for wise Odysseus to return home, let us send [Hermes](#), the Messenger, Slayer of [Argus](#), to the isle of [Ogygia](#), so he can tell the Nymph with the lovely tresses of our unalterable decision, that long-suffering Odysseus may come home. Meanwhile I will go to [Ithaca](#), to stir his son, and encourage him to call the long-haired [Achaean](#)s together, and speak his mind to the [Suitors](#) who slaughter his flocks of sheep, and his shambling cattle with twisted horns. Then I will lead him to [Sparta](#) and sandy [Pylos](#) to gain news of his loyal father's return, if he can, and so win praise.'

BkI:96-155 Athene visits Telemachus.

So saying, she bound to her feet her beautiful sandals of imperishable gold that would carry her over the waves, over the wide lands, as swiftly as the wind. And she took her heavy spear, great and strong, with its tip of sharpened bronze, with which she destroys the ranks of men, and heroes, when that daughter of a mighty father is angered. Then she flew down from the heights of [Olympus](#), and reaching [Ithaca](#) stood at [Odysseus](#)' gate, at the threshold of the court. She appeared as a visitor, [Mentes](#), chief of the [Taphians](#), bronze spear in hand. There she found the insolent suitors, sitting in front of the doors, on ox hides from beasts they had slaughtered themselves, playing at counters: their pages and squires were busy mixing water and wine in bowls, others were wiping tables with sponges then laying them, while others were setting out plentiful servings of meat.

Godlike [Telemachus](#), sitting troubled among the suitors, imagining how his noble father might arrive from somewhere, throw the suitors from the palace, win honour and rule his own again, was first to see her. Thinking of it, sitting among the suitors, he saw [Athene](#), and went straight to the doorway, ashamed a

stranger should wait so long at the gates. Approaching her, he clasped her right hand, took her spear of bronze, and spoke to her winged words: 'Welcome, stranger, here you will find hospitality, and after you have eaten you may tell us why you are here.'

At this, he led the way, and [Pallas](#) Athene followed. Once inside the high hall, he took the spear and set it in a polished rack by a tall pillar, with other spears that belonged to loyal Odysseus. He led Athene herself to a handsome, richly carved chair, spread a linen cloth over it, and seated her there with a footstool for her feet. He drew up on ornate stool for himself, as well, away from the [Suitors](#), lest the stranger should shun the food, annoyed by the din, finding himself in a crowd of insolent men: and so he might ask news of his absent father. Next a maid brought water in a fine gold jug, and poured it over a silver basin, so they could rinse their hands: then drew up a polished table. The housekeeper silently brought them bread, and various delicacies, drawing liberally on her store. And a carver lifted plates of different meats, and set them down with gold cups beside them, while a steward, constantly walking by, poured the wine.

Questions:

1. Read lines 1-21: what sort of man does Odysseus seem to be? Make 3 points [3]
2. What reason does Homer give for Odysseus' delay in returning home? [1]
3. Read lines 44-95. *"Did he win no favour with the sacrifices he made you, by the [Argive](#) ships, on the wide plains of [Troy](#)?"* Why does Athene think Odysseus does not deserve to be kept from his home? [1]
4. What excuse does Zeus give in response to Athene? [1]
5. What are Athene's aims in going to Ithaca? [2]
6. In his description of Athene from line 96, how does Homer show that she is a fearsome goddess, and that Odysseus is lucky to have her on his side? Make 3 specific points [3+3 for quotations]
7. Read the final section: how does Homer characterise Telemachus? What sort of young man does Telemachus seem to be? Make 2 points [2]
8. How does Homer describe the suitors? What does this word mean? [2]