Examining the Homeric Epics

Composed in Greece around 750–725 B.C., the Iliad and the Odyssey are perhaps the greatest masterpieces of the epic form, narrative poetry about a hero’s adventures. Both stories were first told orally, perhaps even sung, and it may not have been until several generations later that these traditional stories were set down in writing. The poems are traditionally credited to a blind poet named Homer. Although there have been many translations of the poems into English, Robert Fitzgerald’s verse renderings are considered among the best at capturing the poems’ high drama and intense emotions. Three important elements of the plot of each epic are the Trojan War, the heroism of Odysseus, and the interference of the gods.

The Trojan War
This legendary war seems to have occurred sometime around 1200 B.C. The earliest literary accounts of it, found in the Iliad and the Odyssey, are elaborated in later classical literature.

According to legend, the Trojan War began after Paris, a Trojan prince, kidnapped the beautiful Helen from her husband, Menelaus (měn’ə-lä’ōs), the king of Sparta. Menelaus recruited kings and soldiers from all over Greece to help him avenge his honor and recover his wife. The Greeks held Troy under siege for ten years.

The Iliad takes place during the tenth year of this war. It tells the story of the Greek warrior Achilles and his quarrel with Menelaus’ brother Agamemnon, ending with the death and funeral of Paris’ brother Hector.

After Hector’s death, the Greeks brought the war to an end thanks to the cleverness of Odysseus, ruler of the island of Ithaca. To break the ten-year stalemate, Odysseus thought of a scheme to make the Trojans think that the Greeks had finally given up. He ordered a giant wooden horse to be built and left at the gates of Troy. The Trojans, waking to find it there—without a Greek in sight—assumed that the enemy had fled and left them a peace offering. They took the horse inside the city, only to discover, too late, that it was filled with Greek soldiers and that Troy was doomed.
The Heroic Story of Odysseus  The Odyssey deals with Odysseus’ adventures as he makes his way home from Troy and with events that take place on Ithaca just before and after his return. The first excerpts that you will read depict some of the wanderings of Odysseus after his departure from Troy with a fleet of 12 ships carrying about 720 men. This time his opponents are not military ones. Instead, he encounters various monsters who try to devour him and enchanting women who try to keep him from his wife, Penelope. The final excerpts describe Odysseus’ homecoming and his reunion with Penelope and his son, Telemachus. In addition to great strength and courage, what sets Odysseus apart from others is a special quality that has been called his craft or guile: the ingenious tricks he uses to get himself out of difficult situations.

The Intervention of the Gods and Goddesses  Adding another dimension to the human struggles recounted in Homer’s epics are the mythic elements—the conflicts among the gods and goddesses on Mount Olympus (≥Ilμp’b). In Homer’s time, most Greeks believed that their gods not only took an active interest in human affairs but also behaved in recognizably human ways, often engaging in their own trivial quarrels and petty jealousies. For example, Athena, the goddess of war and practical wisdom, supported the Greek cause in the Trojan War and championed Odysseus, while Aphrodite (αF’rDr’t’), the goddess of love, sided with Paris and his fellow Trojans. The story of Odysseus’ return from Troy contains some notable instances of divine interference. Odysseus has Athena on his side, but he has displeased the gods who were on the side of Troy. Furthermore, as you will see, he angers another god during one of his first adventures and still another later on. As a result, he is forced to suffer many hardships before he manages to return home.  To Homer’s audience, the Odyssey, with its interfering gods and goddesses and its strange lands and creatures, must have seemed as full of mystery and danger as science fiction and fantasy adventures seem to people today. Just as we can imagine aliens in the next galaxy or creatures created in a laboratory, the ancient Greeks could imagine monsters living just beyond the boundaries of their known world. It was not necessary for them to believe that creatures such as one-eyed giants did exist, but only that they might.

**BACKGROUND**

Greek Mythology  Our knowledge of Greek mythology begins with Homer’s epics, the oldest written record of ancient Greece. Greek mythology does not comprise a religious document, like the Bible or Quran, for example. Some Greek myths explain a natural feature or occurrence, such as the existence of a constellation or the eruption of a volcano. Others are pure entertainment.

**Analyze Visuals**

The image is an oil painting on plaster. It represents a procession of mythological figures. Ask students how the figures on this wall painting differ from Homer’s depiction of the Greek gods and goddesses. **Possible answer:** The frieze is an idealized vision of the mythological figures, showing their beauty and grace. By contrast, Homer depicted the pettiness and flaws of the gods, who could be mean-spirited, jealous, and vain.
Homer: The Epic Poet

Shadowy Figure  Although the ancient Greeks credited a man named Homer with composing the _Iliad_ and the _Odyssey_, scholars have long debated whether Homer really existed. There are many theories about who Homer may have been and when and where he may have lived. According to ancient accounts, he lived sometime between 900 and 700 B.C., possibly on the island of Chios in the eastern Aegean Sea, and he was blind. Most modern scholars agree that the Homeric poems are the work of one or two exceptionally talented bards—singers who made up their verses as they sang.

Oral History  Homer’s epics are all that remains of a series of poems that told the whole story of the Trojan War. In later centuries, the _Iliad_ and the _Odyssey_ were memorized by professional reciters, who performed them at religious festivals throughout Greece. They were also the first works read by Greek schoolchildren. By 300 B.C. many slightly different versions of the poems existed, and scholars began to work at restoring them to their original form.

Models for the Ages  Homer’s epics became models for many later writers, including the Roman poet Virgil, who wrote his own epic in Latin. Poets throughout English literature, from Chaucer in the Middle Ages to Shakespeare in the Renaissance to Keats in the Romantic era, have found inspiration in Homer’s epics. Moreover, by helping to shape classical Greek culture, the epics contributed to the development of many later Western ideas and values.

A Living Tradition  Artists of all kinds continue to draw on Homer’s work. In 1922, the Irish writer James Joyce published his groundbreaking novel _Ulysses_ ("Ulysses" is a Latin form of Odysseus’ name), in which he turned a day in the life of an ordinary man into an Odyssean journey. In 2000, the Coen brothers’ film _O Brother, Where Art Thou_? told the story of a Depression-era Ulysses, an escaped convict returning home to prevent his wife from marrying another man. The 2004 movie _Troy_ is a more straightforward adaptation of Homer’s _Iliad_.
People and Places of the Odyssey

You will find it helpful to become familiar with important people and places in the Odyssey before you begin reading. The map identifies real places mentioned in the poem, such as Troy, Sparta, and Ithaca. It also shows where later readers have thought that some of the imaginary lands visited by Odysseus could have been located, after applying Mediterranean geography to Homer’s descriptions. Following is a list of important characters. All Greek names used in Robert Fitzgerald’s translation have been changed from their original spelling to a more familiar, Latinized spelling.

**IMPORTANT CHARACTERS IN THE ODYSSEY** (in order of mention)

**BOOK 1**
- Helios (hêl’ê-os)—the sun god, who raises his cattle on the island of Thrinctia (thrânt’î-shâ)
- Zeus (zûs)—the ruler of the Greek gods and goddesses; father of Athena and Apollo
- Telemachus (ta-lêm’â-kas)—Odysseus’ son
- Penelope (pe-nê’p-e)—Odysseus’ wife

**BOOK 5**
- Hermes (hûr’mêz)—the god of invention, commerce, and cunning; messenger of the gods
- Calypso (kal’pi-sô)—a sea goddess who lives on the island of Ogygia (ô-gî’jî-a)
- Laertes (lâ’râ’têz)—Odysseus’ father

**BOOK 9**
- Alcinous (al’sin’ô-as)—the king of the Phaeacians (fî’â-shâz)
- Circe (sîr’kî)—a goddess and enchantress who lives on the island of Aeaea (â’e-â’-e
- Cicones (sî-kô’nêz)—allies of the Trojans, who live at Ismarus (îz’mâr’as)
- Lotus Eaters—inhabitants of a land Odysseus visits

**BOOK 10**
- Aeolus (e’ô-lôs)—the guardian of the winds
- Laestrygones (lês’tû-rê’gônêz)—cannibal inhabitants of a distant land
- Eurylochus (yûr’ô-lô-kôs)—a trusted officer of Odysseus
- Periphates (par’û-fê’tês)—the wife of Hades, ruler of the underworld

**BOOK 11**
- Elpenor (êl’pe-nôr)—one of Odysseus’ crew, killed in an accident

**BOOK 12**
- Sirens (sî’rânz)—creatures, part woman and part bird, whose songs lure sailors to their death
- Scylla (skî’lôs)—a six-headed sea monster who devours sailors
- Charybdis (kär’ë-bûd’îs)—a dangerous whirlpool personified as a female sea monster

**BOOK 15**
- Athena (â-thê’nâ)—the goddess of war, wisdom, and cleverness; goddess of crafts
- Eumeus (ë-yû-më’s)—a servant in Odysseus’ household

**BOOK 16**
- Odysseus’ son
- Odysseus’ wife

**BOOK 17**
- Antinous (an-tî-nôs)—a suitor of Penelope’s

**BOOKS 21—23**
- Eurylochus (yûr’ô-lô-kôs)—a trusted officer of Odysseus
- Periphates (par’û-fê’tês)—the wife of Hades, ruler of the underworld
- Tiresias (ти’a-sëz)—a blind prophet whose spirit Odysseus visits in the underworld
- Amphinomus (sim’î-nô’môs)—a suitor of Penelope’s
- Euryclea (yûr’ô-kûl’ê-ä)—an old female servant, still loyal to Odysseus

**REVIEWING YOUR OUTLINE**

- Homer’s World
- People and Places of the Odyssey
- Important Characters in the Odyssey
- Important Places in the Odyssey

**ANALYZE VISUALS**

Ask students what information the map shows that is not in the text under People and Places of the Odyssey? Possible answer: The map shows that the seas around Greece are dotted with islands and that Greece is close to Troy. The map also helps the reader to understand why the sea profoundly influenced life in Greece.

**READING STRATEGY**

- Monitor Reading
  - Suggest that students bookmark Important Characters in the Odyssey to use as a reference as they read.

**ALTERED SPELLINGS**

The following is a list of altered spellings of characters’ names taken from Fitzgerald’s Odyssey and used in this selection:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original</th>
<th>Altered</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Antiklos</td>
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<td>Menelaos</td>
<td>Menelaus</td>
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<td>Agamemnon</td>
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<td>Dulichium</td>
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<tr>
<td>Samê</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Aeaea</td>
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<tr>
<td>Malea</td>
<td>&lt;no change&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kythera</td>
<td>Cythera</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(List continues on page 1192.)
The Odyssey in Art

Artists have been representing images and events from the Odyssey since the seventh century B.C., when Greek artists painted Odyssean images and scenes as decoration on ceramic urns and vases. Since then, artists have continued to tell Odysseus’ story in painting, sculpture, and other media.

Throughout the unit, you will see how numerous artists have interpreted this epic in a range of styles and forms. As you look at the art illustrating each episode, ask yourself what the artists were trying to show about each part of the story and what their own attitudes toward characters and events may have been.

Looking at Art You’ve seen how understanding a writer’s craft can help you appreciate the beauty and meaning of a literary text. In the same way, knowing about artists’ techniques can help you understand and appreciate their work. The following list of terms and related questions may help you identify and think about the choices each artist made. Consider how these choices have contributed to the meaning and beauty of each piece.

**Term** | **Questions**
--- | ---
composition | What shape or space is emphasized?
material | Has the artist used paint, clay, pencil, ink, or some other material?
function | Is the piece useful, decorative, or both?
color | Does the piece have a broad palette (range of colors) or a limited one?
line | Are the lines clean, simple, rough, ornate, or jagged?
shape | Does the piece have large, bold shapes or smaller, more complex ones? Are they geometric or organic (free-form)?
texture | In painting, are the brush strokes distinct or smooth looking? In sculpture or ceramics, is the surface polished or rough?
scale | Does the piece show large things or small ones?
representation | Are the images realistic, stylized, or abstract?

**Landscapes** When you look at a Homeric landscape, ask questions like the ones that follow. See if the answers help you understand each artist’s purpose.

- Which of the following two landscapes is more realistic? How so?
- What material has each artist used? Which do you prefer, and why?
- Look at the composition of each piece. What part of the scene is emphasized in the painting? What is emphasized in the collage?
- Describe the mood and tone of each piece. Which is more lush, and which is more spare? Consider the techniques that created these differences.

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**About 1650: Ulysses Returns Chryseis to Her Father, Claude Lorrain. Oil painting.**

**200: Ulysses and the Sirens, Roman. Mosaic, 130 cm x 344 cm. Musée du Bardo, Tunis, Tunisia. © Bridgeman Art Library.**

**Reading Skill**

**Main Idea**

What is the main idea of the section The Odyssey in Art? Possible answer: The Odyssey has inspired artists from the seventh century B.C. through modern times.

**Altered Spellings List (cont.):**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original</th>
<th>Altered</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Euanthês</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ísmaros</td>
<td>Ismarus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kronos</td>
<td>Cronus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Erebos</td>
<td>Erebus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Amphitritê</td>
<td>Amphitrite</td>
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<td>Phaethousa</td>
<td>Phaethusa</td>
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<td>Hêlios</td>
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<td>Telêmakhos</td>
<td>Telemachus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penêlopê</td>
<td>Penelope</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Hermes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kalypso</td>
<td>Calypso</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laërtês</td>
<td>Laertes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alkinoôs</td>
<td>Alcinous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirkê</td>
<td>Circe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kikonês</td>
<td>Cicones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lotos Eaters</td>
<td>Lotus Eaters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(List continues on page 1205.)
Narrative Art  Most of the artwork in this selection tells a story in one way or another. Consider how the artist’s choices of what to include and emphasize affect your sense of the events portrayed in each work. Compare and contrast how these events are presented in visual form with how they are presented in the text.
- One of the following pieces is a decorative scene painted on a useful object, and the other is a book illustration. How does each piece’s function affect its style?
- Compare the backgrounds on which the two scenes are painted. How does each background affect the way you view and understand the scene?
- Which scene makes more sense to you? Explain.

Portraiture  As you look at a portrait, ask yourself what the image suggests about the character or characters being depicted. Try to identify the techniques that helped the artist create that impression.
- What does the position of the characters tell you about the scene rendered in terra cotta?
- Consider the difference in dimension between the two pieces; one is flat, while the other is in relief. How does that difference affect the feel of each piece?
- The pastel drawing is a highly abstract figure, as opposed to a realistic one. What do you think of it? Why might an artist choose such an abstract style?

Analyze Visuals
Ask students to choose which artistic rendering best illustrates the characters from the Odyssey. Students’ answers will vary but should cite specific elements from the piece.

Reading Skill
Make Inferences
What can you learn about ancient Greece by studying the plaque and urn from that period? Possible answer: The plaque and urn reveal information about the clothing, hairstyles, and tools of the ancient Greeks. They also demonstrate the high level of skill in different art forms.

Reading Strategy
Set a Purpose for Reading
Ask students how “Homer’s World” helped them accomplish their purpose of getting ready to read the Odyssey. Possible answer: Students may say that “Homer’s World” provided historical and geographical background, that it gave them an overview of the characters, that it provided images that will help them visualize events and characters, and that it stimulated their interest in reading the story.