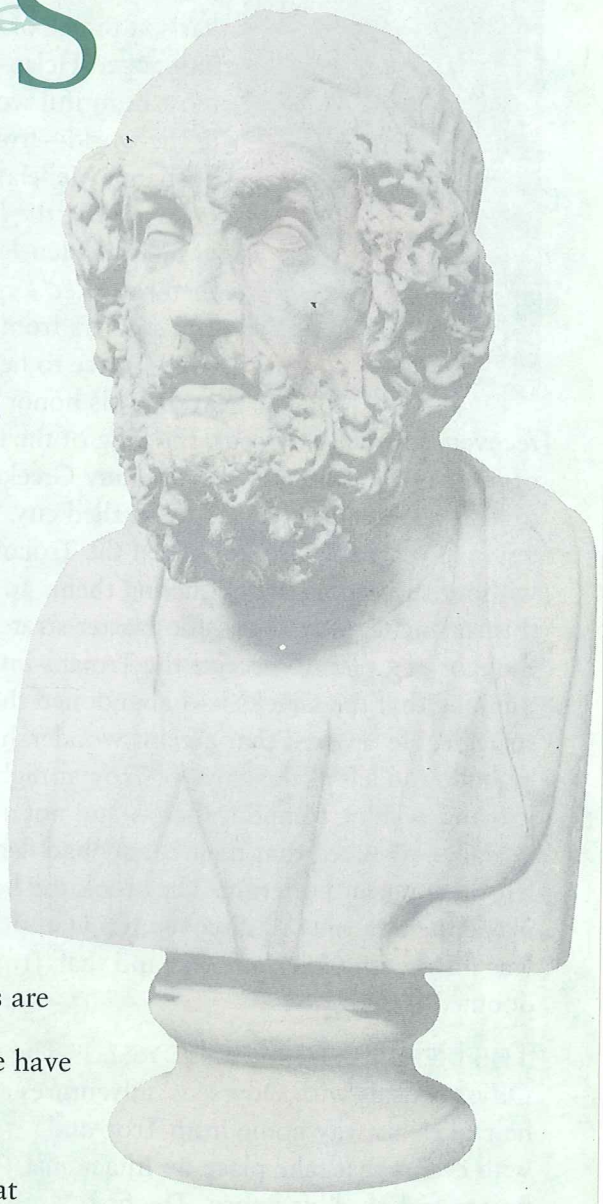
HOMER'S WORLD

EXAMINING THE HOMERIC EPICS



Composed in Greece around 800 B.C., Homer's two related epics—the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—are perhaps the greatest masterpieces of the epic form, a long narrative poem 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 they were set down in writing. Partly because of this delay, scholars disagree over the authorship of the epics. A blind poet named Homer usually gets the credit, but many think that the epics are actually the combined work of several poets. Although there have been many translations of these poems into English, Robert Fitzgerald's verse renderings are considered among the best at capturing the high drama and intense emotions of the epics. Three important elements of their plots are the Trojan War, the heroism of Odysseus, and the interference of the gods.

The Trojan War

The *Iliad* presents an episode of the Trojan War, which may have occurred around 1200 B.C. According to legend, this war began after Paris, a prince of Troy, kidnapped Helen—the most beautiful woman in the world—from her husband, Menelaus (mĕn′ə-lā′əs), the king of Sparta. Menelaus then recruited kings and soldiers from all over Greece to help him avenge his honor and recover his wife. Odysseus, the king of the island of Ithaca (ĭth′ə-kə), was one of many Greeks who sailed to Troy and besieged the walled city. For ten long years the Greeks battled the Trojans without succeeding in conquering them. To break this stalemate, Odysseus, "the master strategist," thought of a plan to deceive the Trojans into thinking that the Greeks had abandoned the struggle. He ordered that a giant wooden horse be built and left at the gates of Troy at night. The Trojans, waking to find it there—and not a Greek in sight—assumed that their 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 (pə-nĕl′ə-pē). The final excerpts describe Odysseus' homecoming and his reunion with his wife and 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 his 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 conflicts among the gods and goddesses on Mount Olympus (ə-lĭm′pəs). In Homer's time, most Greeks believed that the 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 (ə-thē′nə), the goddess of war and practical wisdom, supported the Greek cause in the Trojan War and championed Odysseus, while Aphrodite (ăf′rə-dī′tē), 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 one later. 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, 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.

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—such as Aeaea, Ogygia, and the islands of Aeolus and the Sirens—could have been located, after applying actual Mediterranean area geography to Homer's descriptions. The chart identifies important characters and places and tells you how to pronounce their names.

IMPORTANT CHARACTERS IN THE ODYSSEY

(in order of mention)

Book 9

Calypso (kə-lĭp′sō)—a sea goddess who lives on the island of **Ogygia** (ō-gĭj′yə)

Alcinous (ăl-sĭn′ō-əs)—the king of the **Phaeacians** (fē-ā′shənz)

Laertes (lā-ûr′tēz)—Odysseus' father

Circe (sûr′sē)—a goddess and enchantress who lives on the island of **Aeaea** (ē-ē′ə)

Zeus (zo͞os)—the chief of the Greek gods and goddesses; father of Athena and Apollo

Cicones (sī′kō′nēz)—allies of the Trojans, who live at **Ismarus** (ĭs-măr′əs)

Lotus Eaters (lō′təs-ē′tərz)—inhabitants of a land Odysseus visits

Cyclopes (sī-klō′pēz)—a race of one-eyed giants; an individual member of the race is a **Cyclops** (sī′klŏps)

Apollo (ə-pŏl′ō)—the god of music, poetry, prophecy, and medicine

Poseidon (pō-sīd′n)—the god of the sea, earthquakes, and horses; father of the Cyclops who battles Odysseus

Book 10

Aeolus (ē′ə-ləs)—the guardian of the winds

Laestrygones (lĕs′trĭ-gō′nēz)—cannibal inhabitants of a distant land

Eurylochus (yo͝o-rĭl′ə-kəs)—a trusted officer of Odysseus'

Hermes (hûr′mēz)—the god of invention, commerce, and cunning; messenger of the gods

Persephone (pər-sĕf′ə-nē)—the wife of the ruler of the underworld

Tiresias (tī-rē′syəs) of Thebes (thēbz)—a blind prophet whose spirit Odysseus visits in the underworld

Book 12

Sirens (sī′rənz)—creatures, part woman and part bird, whose songs lure sailors to their death

Scylla (sĭl′ə)—a six-headed sea monster who devours sailors

Charybdis (kə-rĭb′dĭs)—a dangerous whirlpool personified as a female sea monster

Helios (hē′lē-ŏs′)—the sun god, who pastures his cattle on the island of Thrinacia (thrĭ-nā′shə)

Books 21-23

Antinous (ăn-tĭn′ō-əs) a suitor of Penelope's

Eurymachus (yo͝o-rĭm′ə-kəs)—a suitor of Penelope's

Telemachus (tə-lĕm′ə-kəs)—Odysseus' son

Eumaeus (yo͞o-mē′əs)—a servant in Odysseus' household

Philoetius (fĭ-lē′shəs)—a servant in Odysseus' household

Eurycleia (yo͝or′ĭ-klē′ə)—an old female servant, still loyal to Odysseus

LEARNING the Language of *Literature*

The Epic is a long, narrative poem that tells about the adventures of a hero who reflects the ideals and values of a nation or race. Although epics are often based on legends that contain a kernel of truth, they are not works of history but works of the imagination. The epic portrays the past, but it is an imaginary past—a time supposedly better than the time in which the epic is created. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were composed sometime between 800 B.C. and 600 B.C. by a Greek poet known as Homer, but they tell about events happening long before Homer's time. Still, the values and beliefs that come through are those of Homer's world—including its sense of the heroic.

The Heroic Tradition

The heroic tradition set standards on the value of man's honor. How important was honor? Consider this story. A king's wife is kidnapped, and he starts a war to avenge this act. A great hero refuses to fight in this war because he too feels dishonored in a dispute over a woman. Then the hero's dear friend borrows the hero's armor and is himself killed in the war. Now the hero, full of rage, must avenge this death. Afterward he must finally overcome his anger and return the body of his slain enemy to his enemy's father. Peace must be made. Honor must be restored. These events make up the story of the great tragic poem the *Iliad.* The war is the Trojan War. The hero's name is Achilles.

The *Odyssey,* taking up where the *Iliad* leaves off, brings us a different kind of hero. This is Odysseus, that craftiest of Greeks, who has masterminded the end of the war, using a trick wooden horse, and now wants to go home, perhaps seeing a bit of the world on the way. How can Odysseus get back to his wife and son—and keep his honor in the process? That is the story of the *Odyssey.*

Mosaic of a mask discovered in Pompeii. Leaves, fruit, and festoon used for detail.

Epic Hero

As much as anything, then, an epic is about its hero, and about how he becomes heroic. An **epic hero** is a larger-than-life figure, usually male, who embodies the ideals of a nation or race. Epic heroes take part in long, dangerous adventures and accomplish great deeds that require courage and superhuman strength. You will see that Odysseus is an epic hero who displays some of the qualities that were honored in Greek society. Yet because he is human, Odysseus also displays some human faults.

YOUR TURN In the excerpt at the right, Odysseus has been offered a meal by Circe, an enchantress who has turned a group of his men into pigs. What do you learn about Odysseus from these lines? What values does he represent?

EPIC HERO

"Circe regarded me, as there I sat
disconsolate, and never touched a crust.
Then she stood over me and chided me:
'Why sit at table mute, Odysseus? . . .'
I turned to her at once, and said:
'Circe,
where is the captain who could bear to touch
this banquet, in my place? A decent man
would see his company before him first.
Put heart in me to eat and drink—you may,
by freeing my companions. I must see them.'"

—Book 10, lines 81–93

The Craft of the Epic

The *Odyssey* was not a written story that the Greeks would sit down and read. Rather it was a *performance* by a master storyteller, a poet with a golden voice, singing or reciting his great tale in verse, crafting many of the details as he went. Two of the techniques that he used are the **epic simile** and the **epithet.**

EPIC SIMILE

And Odysseus
let the bright molten tears run down his cheeks,
weeping [like] the way a wife mourns for her lord
on the lost field where he has gone down fighting
the day of wrath that came upon his children.
At sight of the man panting and dying there,
she slips down to enfold him, crying out;
then feels the spears, prodding her back and shoulders,
and goes bound into slavery and grief.
Piteous weeping wears away her cheeks:
but no more piteous than Odysseus' tears,
cloaked as they were, now, from the company.

—Book 8, lines 560–571

EPIC SIMILE As you know, a simile is a comparison between two things that uses the word *like* or *as.* Oftentimes, Homer develops a simile at great length and detail, going on for several lines. This is known as the **epic simile,** an elaborate, more involved version of a regular simile. Homer uses epic similes for emphasis, whether he's describing a character's thoughts and feelings or the magnitude of a battle between two armies.

YOUR TURN In the excerpt at the right, Odysseus is watching the performance of a bard, a minstrel like Homer himself. Suddenly he finds himself listening to the story of the fall of Troy and of his own part in it. What is his reaction? Notice the two things that are being compared. What does the comparison help to emphasize?

EPITHET

"'Son of Laertes and the gods of old,
Odysseus, master mariner and soldier,
you shall not stay here longer against your will;
but home you may not go
unless you take a strange way round and come
to the cold homes of Death and pale Persephone.
You shall hear prophecy from the rapt shade
of blind Tiresias of Thebes, forever
charged with reason even among the dead;
to him alone, of all the flitting ghosts,
Persephone has given a mind undarkened.'"

—Book 10, lines 200–210

EPITHETS A bard telling his story is like a jazz musician who plays a melody a little differently each time. The musician, improvising around a known theme, has standard little riffs—handy musical phrases he or she can throw in when needed. The Homeric bard did the same with **epithets**—brief, descriptive phrases that helped to characterize a particular person or thing, and that had the right meter or number of syllables to fill out a line. In the *Odyssey,* Odysseus is referred to as "master mariner" or "old contender." The hero of the *Iliad* is often called "swift-footed" Achilles. Again and again, the dawn comes up "with fingertips of rose." The ocean becomes the "winedark sea."

YOUR TURN In the passage at the right, Odysseus, who has been spending time with Circe, "the loveliest of goddesses," now begs her to help him get home. Her advice is not something he wants to hear. What epithets, or descriptive phrases, can you find in this passage?

The Active Reader: Skills and Strategies

Imagine an evening long ago. A traveling storyteller is about to perform. You can't read or write, but you like a good story. This bard will tell the latest news from afar and then spin tales of the heroes of old—their adventures with monsters and gods and goddesses. The epic you're about to read is much like what you might have heard that night. The strategies explained here can help you appreciate the craft of the epic.

Reading the Epic

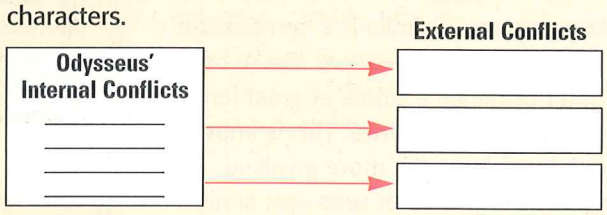
Strategies for Using your READER'S NOTEBOOK

As you read, take notes to

- help you keep track of the epic as a story
- record memorable poetic images and sound effects
- analyze and understand the epic hero

1 Strategies for Reading the Epic as Narrative

- Look for signs of conflict in the story. Try using a simple graphic like this one to identify external and internal conflicts among characters.



- Track the events of the plot, and try to **predict** the outcome.
- Identify the main and minor characters and **question** what motivates them.
- **Visualize** the time and place of the setting.
- **Clarify** the overall theme of the epic.
- When possible, **connect** the story to your personal experiences.

2 Strategies for Reading the Epic as Poetry

- Read the lines for their sense, just as you would read prose. Follow the punctuation, and remember that the end of a line does not always mean the end of a thought.
- Try reading the lines aloud, the way the epic was originally heard.
- Listen for sound effects, such as alliteration, assonance, consonance, and rhyme, that the poet has created.
- Read difficult passages more than once. You can also read ahead to keep track of the plot.
- Notice how figurative language, such as the epic simile, can **clarify** the meaning of the epic.

3 Strategies for Understanding the Epic Hero

- Decide what ideals and values the hero represents and what his goals are.
- Determine what the hero does to preserve his honor and fame.
- **Evaluate** the hero's role in any conflicts. How does he resolve them? Does he ever, through a character flaw, make them worse?
- Identify any changes or development in the hero's character.

Need More Help?

Remember that active readers use the essential reading strategies explained on page 7: **visualize, predict, clarify, question, connect, evaluate, monitor.**