

Homer and the Homeric Question

Reading and Discussion

Homer was the earliest and most famous poet of Ancient Greece. We do not know exactly when he lived, where he lived, or what sort of life he lived, but there are many stories about him that are believed to be true. According to the famous historian, **Herodotus**, Homer lived around 850 BC. However, other people believe he lived during the times of the **Trojan War**, which was approximately between 1194 and 1184 BC. Some accounts say that Homer was blind. At that time, however, people often said poets were blind because it was believed that being blind helped them to see things that others could not see, such as the activities of the Greek gods.

Homer is thought to have written two major epic Greek poems, **the Iliad** and the **Odyssey**. Epic poems are very long narrative poems that describe heroic deeds and events that are believed to be true and significant to a specific people or culture. The Iliad describes the story of the ten year siege of the city of **Troy**. The Odyssey tells the story of the journey of **King Odysseus** on his way back home to the island of **Ithaca** after the war and fighting was over.

The Iliad and the Odyssey are believed to result from an oral tradition. Before writing was known among the Greeks and before they borrowed the alphabet from the **Phoenicians**, singers, minstrels, and poets used oral tradition to pass on stories, folklores, and tales containing messages and testimony to other generations. This is how they transmitted cultural information to ensure that it was not lost from one generation to the next.

Some scholars believe that these two poems were written by one poet, while others think they were written by several poets, possibly from different generations. With each generation's retelling, the poems were changed and lengthened. Some scholars argue that because of similarities in style, the poems were probably written by the same person, though to this day, there is no definite answer concerning the authorship of the poems. Both the Iliad and the Odyssey are of extreme significance to Western literature and contain the ethics and values of the Ancient Greek civilization.

Since antiquity, scholars have been studying Homer. This field of study is called **Homeric scholarship**. It includes many areas of study, including the style, the dialect, the theory of oral tradition, and the way the poems were transmitted. It even includes historical and archaeological excavations which are used to find evidence of the Trojan wars. The debate over questions relating to Homer is known as the **Homeric Question**. The Homeric Question deals with different issues such as the following:

- Who was Homer?
- Was Homer a real or fictional person?
- Who wrote the Iliad and the Odyssey?
- Was it one single author or multiple authors?
- When, where, and under what circumstances were the poems written?
- Is the culture and tradition described in the poems true and reliable?

Name _____

Date _____

Activities

Activity A: Multiple Choice:

1. The epic poem, the Odyssey, tells the story of:
 - a. The life of Homer
 - b. The ten year siege of the city of Troy
 - c. The journey of a king trying to get back home to the island of Ithaca after the fighting was over
 - d. None of the above

2. The epic poem the Iliad tells the story of:
 - a. The life of Homer
 - b. The ten year siege of the city of Troy
 - c. The journey of a king trying to get back home after the fighting was over
 - d. None of the above

Activity B: Matching:

- | | |
|------------------------------|---|
| _____ 1. Epic poem | a. dates back to antiquity |
| _____ 2. Oral tradition | b. stories passed down from one generation to the other and containing testimony |
| _____ 3. Homeric scholarship | c. very long narrative that describes heroic deeds and events, which are believed to be true by its culture |

Activity C: Name three areas of study in Homeric scholarship:

1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

Activity D: True or False:

- _____ 1. Scholars are certain that Homer was born in 850BC.

- _____ 2. The Iliad and the Odyssey are considered extremely important in Western literature.

Answer Key

Activity A

1. The epic poem the Odyssey tells the story of:

- a. The life of Homer
- b. The ten year siege of the city of Troy
- c. **The journey of a king trying to get back home to the island of Ithaca after the fighting was over**
- d. None of the above

2. The epic poem the Iliad tells the story of:

- a. The life of Homer
- b. **The ten year siege of the city of Troy**
- c. The journey of a king trying to get back home after the fighting was over
- d. None of the above

Activity B

 c 1. Epic poem

a. dates back to antiquity

 b 2. Oral tradition

b. stories passed down from one generation to the other and containing testimony

 a 3. Homeric scholarship

c. very long narrative that describes heroic deeds and events, which are believed to be true by its culture

Activity C

- a) Style used in the poems
- b) Dialect used in the poems
- c) Theory of oral tradition
- d) The way the poems were transmitted
- e) Historical and archaeological excavations to try to find evidence of the Trojan wars

Activity D

 F 12. Scholars are certain that Homer was born in 850BC.

 T 13. The Iliad and the Odyssey are considered extremely important in Western literature.