

The Odyssey of Homer

A verse translation by Allen Mandelbaum

About the Author

No one knows whether Homer actually existed or, if he did, whether he was the sole author of the two great founding epics of the Western tradition that are commonly attributed to him—the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. A tradition dating back to ancient Greece holds that there was indeed a poet/bard by that name—blind, in some accounts—who lived sometime before 700 B.C. in Asia Minor, possibly in Smyrna or on the island of Chios. The scholarly basis for locating the author in that region is the blend of Ionic and Aeolic dialects in which these epics were composed.

Background

Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* recount events and legends surrounding the Trojan War, the mythic version of which may have sprung from an actual conflict between Greece and Troy in the mid-thirteenth century B.C. Archaeological remnants of the ancient cities

have corroborated the historical reality of parts of the Homeric legends. The heroic battles and bitter aftermath of that war inspired the poetry of generations of bards, who passed on these stories in verse and song. Linguistic evidence and cultural allusions place the likely time of authorship of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* sometime in the eighth century B.C.

Nineteenth-century scholars were skeptical that these epics were the work of a single man because they doubted that an illiterate bard could have fashioned such complex and elevated verse. But a twentieth-century scholar noticed that the purpose of the often-repeated epithets in Homeric verse was to fill out the meter of the line rather than fill out its meaning. This insight suggested improvisation by a bard who was reciting orally from memory. Nevertheless, the precise authorship of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* remains a matter of speculation rather than verifiable fact.

Quick Guide

As you read *The Odyssey of Homer*, keep these literary elements in mind:

- **Character motivation** is the reason or reasons behind a character's behavior. The motivations of Odysseus and other characters often seem strange at first but become more understandable as the narrative progresses.
- The purpose of **comparing and contrasting characters** in a literary work is to clarify and understand their relationships and how those relationships relate to theme.
- The **historical and cultural context** includes details of dress, behavior, customs, belief systems, and lifestyle that are rooted in the epoch in which the work takes place. *The Odyssey of Homer's* setting in ancient Greece, steeped in traditional pagan mythology, is important in understanding various aspects of the key characters' values, goals, and motives.
- An **epic** is a long narrative or narrative poem about the deeds and adventures of gods or heroes. The central figure of an epic, **the epic hero**—in this case, Odysseus—is a figure of great, sometimes larger-than-life stature.
- **Fantasy** includes elements not found in real life, such as supernatural events and imaginary places, creatures, and things. *The Odyssey of Homer* is rich in fantastic elements, including the Cyclops, Círcē, and the Sirens.
- The **theme** is a central message or insight conveyed in a work of literature. Among the themes explored in *The Odyssey of Homer* are the role of the hero, family relationships, long journeys, and fate and justice.