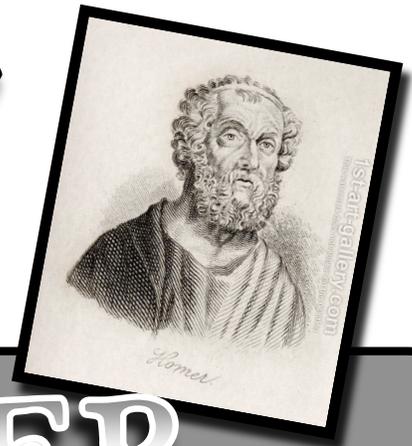


THE ODYSSEY



HOMER

Homer's life is a shadow in the mists of ancient history. All that we know for certain about him is that he composed two of the greatest epics in world literature, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, as well as several hymns to the gods. The content, ideals, and style of his epics formed the basis of Greek education in the classical age of Socrates, Plato, Sophocles, and Aristotle and influenced the course of western literature for centuries to come.

The Iliad and *The Odyssey* stand as two of the greatest works ever composed. They have influenced writers throughout the ages for the beauty and power of their imagery, for their character development, for the universality of their themes, and for their extraordinary stories. Homer was the world's first great writer, a model for others to imitate.

Scholars conjecture from scraps of evidence that Homer was a blind poet who may have been born on the island of Chios (also spelled in English as Khios) in the Aegean Sea. Because of the dearth of information about him, it is not possible to determine specific details about his life: where he lived, whether he was married, when he died. In fact, it is not even possible to determine whether he was one person or several.

Homer probably composed his works between 700 and 800 B.C. Rather than writing his compositions, he probably recited them. For this reason, it is said, he called himself a "singer" rather than a writer. After his death, others kept his works alive by reciting them as they traveled from place to place.

When Homer composed *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the events in both stories were already at least 600 years old. Thus, the plots unfold in an age when recorded history was in its infancy, about 3,200 years ago. At that time, humankind's imagination peopled the known world with superhuman heroes, and nature—the seas, the skies, the forests, and the winds—reflected the mood of the gods inhabiting unseen worlds above and below. In each epic, humans—often noble persons of royal lineage—interact with the gods, sometimes obeying them, sometimes defying them. The plot of each epic consists of a series of exploits and adventures that help shape and define the main character and provide examples of heroism, wisdom, and other desirable qualities for the audience to imitate.

The Iliad and *The Odyssey* are classified as epic poems, long narrative works that are highly formal and elevated in tone but easy to comprehend. Some translators present these epics in prose, making them read like novels.