

Authors: Homer

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Portrait of the Poet Homer - Walters Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Synopsis

The Greek poet Homer was born sometime between the 12th and 8th centuries B.C., near the coast of Asia Minor, which today is Turkey. He is famous for "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey," long, epic poems that told stories about heroes. The poems are very important to Western culture, but very little is known about the author who may have written them.

The Mystery Of Homer

Homer, the Greek poet who wrote long story poems about heroes in "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey," is a mystery. Some scholars believe him to be one man, while others think the stories were created by a group. Since storytelling was a spoken art that was memorized and then passed on from one person to another, some people think Homer gathered the stories, then passed them on by reciting them.

Homer's style was more musical and is very different from the more educated, written poems, stories and plays of the Roman poet Virgil or the English author Shakespeare. Homer's stories have parts that repeat like the chorus of an opera. His works are called epic poetry, which tells long stories about a hero, rather than lyric poetry, which was told with lyre or musical harp in hand.

All this guessing about who he was has led to what is known as the Homeric Question. Was Homer a real person? This is often thought to be the greatest mystery in the world of literature.

When He Was Born

There are many theories about when Homer was born because there is no real information about him. Guesses at his birth date range from 750 B.C. all the way back to 1,200 B.C., the time of the Trojan War. "The Iliad" tells the story of the Trojan War, so some scholars thought it fit to put the poet closer to the time of that actual event. But others believe the poetic style of his work is from a much later period. Greek historian Herodotus, often called the father of history, placed Homer around 850 B.C.

Part of the problem is that Homer lived before a system for marking dates was in place. The Olympic Games of classical Greece marked 776 B.C. as a starting point. After that, every four years marked time for the next Olympic Games. In Homer's case, it is difficult to give someone a birth date when he was born before there was a calendar.

Where He Was Born

Once again, the exact location of Homer's birth cannot be pinpointed, but that doesn't stop people from trying to find it. It has been identified as Asia Minor, which is Turkey today, Ionia or Smyrna in western Turkey, or the island of Chios, just off the western coast of Turkey. Today there are seven cities that claim Homer was born there.

There is some basis for some of these claims. The dialect, or words, in "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey" is Asiatic Greek. This dialect is also called Ionic, which was spoken in Smyrna and western Turkey. "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey" frequently speak of strong winds blowing from the northwest, from Thrace in southeast Europe. All these clues point to the idea that Homer came from this area.

"The Iliad" and "The Odyssey" were so popular that this dialect became the norm for much of Greek literature that came after them.

What He Was Like

All facts people believe are about the life of Homer come from his poems. Homer is thought to have been blind. This idea comes from Demodocus, a blind poet and singer in "The Odyssey," who sang epic tales of conflict and heroes and was praised by all at the king's banquet where he told the stories. This has been interpreted as Homer's hint describing his own life. As a result, many statues have been carved of Homer with thick curly hair, a beard and sightless eyes.

Countless attempts to recreate the life and personality of the author from the content of his epic poems have occupied writers for centuries.

"The Iliad" And "The Odyssey"

Homer's two epic poems provide important clues about early human society, and they also show how little the world has changed. Even if "The Iliad" was written thousands of years ago, the story of the attack of Troy, the Trojan War and Paris' kidnapping of Helen, the world's most beautiful woman, are all familiar characters or actions. Some believe Homer personally knew about the plain of Troy, because his description was so perfect in the poem.

"The Odyssey" picks up after the fall of Troy. Some say "The Odyssey" has a different style than "The Iliad" and was written 100 years later. Other historians claim the more formal structure of "The Iliad" was written when Homer was young and energetic and the easier-to-understand storytelling in "The Odyssey" was written when Homer was decades older.

Homer enriched his storytelling with many similes and metaphors, which inspired many writers that came after him. He often began in the middle of a story and then filled in the missing information using memories of the characters.

The two poems pop up throughout modern literature: Homer's "The Odyssey" has parallels in James Joyce's "Ulysses," and his tale of Achilles in "The Iliad" is echoed in J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Fall of Gondolin." Even the Coen brothers' film "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" makes use of "The Odyssey."

Legacy

Harvard professor Werner Jaeger wrote "Plato tells us that in his time many believed that Homer was the educator of all Greece. Since then, Homer's influence has spread far beyond the frontiers of Hellas [Greece]...." "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey" have provided not only seeds but also the rich soil for our ever-growing arts and sciences. For the Greeks, Homer was a godfather of their national culture, producing rich rhythmic tales of mythology that have filled the world's imagination.

Homer's real life may remain a mystery, but the very real impact of his works continues to illuminate our world today.

Quiz

- 1 The central idea of the biography is developed by:
- (A) describing the theory that Homer's writing style changed as he aged
 - (B) describing the various questions that scholars have about Homer's life
 - (C) describing Homer's dialect, as portrayed in "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey"
 - (D) describing the challenges that Homer faced in trying to gain recognition for his work
- 2 Which of these sentences from the biography would be MOST important to include in an objective summary of the biography?
- (A) Homer, the Greek poet who wrote long story poems about heroes in "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey," is a mystery.
 - (B) Homer's style was more musical and is very different from the more educated, written poems, stories and plays of the Roman poet Virgil or the English author Shakespeare.
 - (C) "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey" frequently speak of strong winds blowing from the northwest, from Thrace in southeast Europe.
 - (D) The Olympic Games of classical Greece marked 776 B.C. as a starting point. After that, every four years marked time for the next Olympic Games.
- 3 Read the following sentence from the section "The Iliad" And "The Odyssey."

Homer enriched his storytelling with many similes and metaphors, which inspired many writers that came after him.

The author uses the word "enriched" to mean:

- (A) made clearer
- (B) made simpler
- (C) made more complex
- (D) made more profitable

Read the paragraph from the section "What He Was Like."

All facts people believe are about the life of Homer come from his poems. Homer is thought to have been blind. This idea comes from Demodocus, a blind poet and singer in "The Odyssey," who sang epic tales of conflict and heroes and was praised by all at the king's banquet where he told the stories. This has been interpreted as Homer's hint describing his own life. As a result, many statues have been carved of Homer with thick curly hair, a beard and sightless eyes.

Which two words would BEST replace "conflict" and "banquet" in the excerpt above?

- (A) discord; feast
- (B) arguments; dinner
- (C) bickering; meal
- (D) excitement; celebration

Answer Key

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