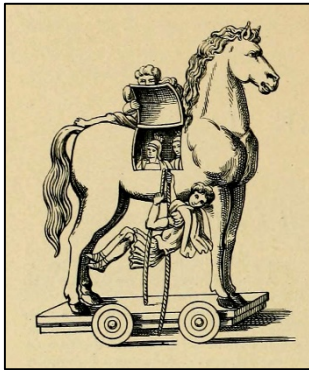


Odysseus and his Epic Journey

Odysseus is the hero of the *Odyssey*, an ancient epic poem about his adventures. It features his heroic deeds, deadly encounters, and the gods and goddesses who helped or created chaos along the way. The stories were created by Homer, an important ancient Greek bard and poet. They were originally a form of spoken entertainment, but were put into writing between 800 and 600 BCE.



Imaginative illustrations of the Trojan Horse from an Ancient Roman Text

The action began just after Odysseus claimed victory in the Trojan War (c. 1200 BCE). The victory over Troy was the subject of an earlier epic poem, the *Iliad*. Most people remember the Trojan War because the Greek's followed the goddess Diana's advice to build an enormous hollow wooden horse, fill it with the best warriors, and send it to the leaders of Troy as a gift. Led by Odysseus, warriors emerged after midnight, took the city, and won the war.

After the victory, Odysseus began a journey from Troy to his home on the Island of Ithaca. He was eager to see Penelope, his wife, and Telemachus, his son. His sea voyage took him to many places in the western Mediterranean, and led to encounters with challenging obstacles and hair-raising adventures.

Sometimes helped and at other times hindered by the gods, **it took him ten years to get to Ithaca!** In addition to outsmarting the Sirens, Odysseus encountered numerous other problems; a blood thirsty **Cyclops**, survival in the land of the dead, giants and witches, a sea monster, and fierce storms. It was an **epic** journey.

The map from Shmoop, a digital education publishing company, illustrates the scope of his journey. Here are some highlights:

#1 The City of Troy

#3 The Land of the Lotus Eaters: seemed like peaceful people, but they drugged Odysseus' men into a stupor.

#4 Odysseus tricks the Giant One-eyed Cyclops to escape death. But the Cyclops father, Poseidon, god of the sea, punishes Odysseus.

#5 Aiolos is the palace of the wind god. He helps Odysseus by tying all stormy wind in a bag and sending a gentle west wind to take the hero home.

#7 Aiaia, the island home of Circe, the daughter of Helios the sun god. Odysseus and the crew spend over a year on Aiaia! When they leave, Circe gives them advice on how to overcome the next obstacles.

An epic is a long poem that relates a story about the building of a nation or culture.

But the FIRST purpose of an epic is to tell a GOOD story.

Epics are also about heroes and the hardships they overcome. The *Iliad*, and the *Odyssey* are epic poems about ancient events in the founding of the Greek culture and country.



The map of Odysseus' travels begins in Troy, #1 on the right.

Shmoop Editorial Team. *The Odyssey* by Homer.

#10 The wily Sirens lure sailors to their death on the rocks with their beautiful singing.

#11 Skylla, a giant sea monster with six heads, snatches six of Odysseus' men right off the ship.

#12 After the god Helios punishes the crew, destroying all in a thunderbolt from Zeus, Odysseus is the single survivor. He floats on wreckage from his ship to Kalypso's Island. (Kalypso (also Calypso) is a beautiful woman who enchants him into remaining for years. She is also very jealous.



Odysseus and his crew escape the cyclops

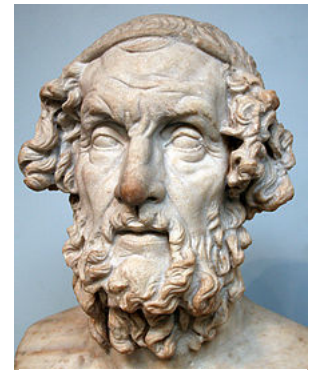
Odysseus and Polyphemus, painted in 1896 by [Arnold Böcklin](#).
[Polyphemus](#).

#15 On Mount Olympus, the goddess Athena again goes to bat for Odysseus and pleads with the gods (who are very irritated with Odysseus) to release him from Kalypso's spell and allow him to return to his wife and son.

#16 Odysseus arrives on Ithaca, but finds he must devise a plan to rid his home of the suitors who were pursuing his wife because a) she was rich and b) Odysseus was presumed dead.

The Author

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were originally spoken entertainment. The exciting stories of adventure, heroes and heroic deeds, villains, gods and goddesses, were recited by Homer, a talented **bard** or story teller who sang and recited tales to entertain people. Blind since birth, he was born sometime between the 12th and 8th century BCE. Homer's role as the author is sometimes debated. But today most scholars agree that he created these epic poems. Like other bards, he likely first sang stories handed down from prior generations. But then he also created many original story poems. Over time, he refined his stories, singing them and playing a lyre to accompany his voice. Eventually others began to write them down. At some point, they were collected and written on papyrus scrolls, then re-copied into evolving versions over the years.



Homer, the blind bard who first sang the *Odyssey*. Statue in the British Museum, created in the late BCE.

Why Is the *Odyssey* Important?

Why do people still care about a story that is thousands of years old? On one level, it is because the *Odyssey* was central to defining Greek culture and national identity. The Trojan War was the first moment in history when the various groups living in what is now Greece came together as one people for a common purpose. Homer's stories were the place where Greeks had access to their history and where they learned about important events, heroes, and defeated enemies.

One another level, the *Odyssey* helped to define the character, values, and identity of the people who founded and built Western Civilization. The epic influenced literature ever since it was first sung, spoken, and shared. Its primary theme of the Heroes Journey, and other key subjects such as yearning to return home, perseverance, loyalty, growing in wisdom, and vengeance framed Western literature and how people think across the ages in Europe and North America. These ideas are still the bedrock of literature, films, and theater to this very day. Hollywood movies, plays about the obstacles overcome by heroes, poetry, songs, and art-works depicting heroic deeds are contemporary connections to the epic deeds and journeys of Homer's heroes.