THE ODYSSEY

an introduction by
David Adams Leeming
Almost 3,000 years ago, people who lived in the starkly beautiful part of the world we now call Greece were telling stories about a great war. The person credited with later gathering all these stories together and telling them as one unified epic is a man named Homer (Homeros, in Greek). Homer’s great war stories are called, in English, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey.* (In Greek, the *Iliad* is *Ilias* and the *Odyssey* is *Odysseia.*)
Homer’s stories probably can be traced to historical struggles for control of the waterway leading from the Aegean Sea to the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea. These real battles would have taken place as early as 1200 B.C. – a time that was at least as long ago for Homer’s audience as the Pilgrim’s landing at the Plymouth Rock is for us. (#1)
Homer’s first epic was the *Iliad*, which tells of a ten-year war fought on the plains outside the walls of a great city called Troy (also known as Ilion). The ruins of Troy can still be seen in western Turkey. In Homer’s story the Trojan War was fought between the people of Troy and an alliance of Greek kings (at that time each island and area of the Greek mainland had its own king). The *Iliad* tells us that the cause of the war was sexual jealousy: The world’s most beautiful woman, Helen, abandoned her husband, Menelaus, a Greek king, and ran off with Paris, a prince of Troy. (#2)
The *Odyssey*, Homer’s second epic, is the story of the attempt of one Greek soldier, Odysseus, to get home after the Trojan War. All epic poems in the Western world owe something to the basic patterns established by these two stories. (#3)
Epics are long narrative poems that tell of the adventures of heroes who in some way embody the values of their civilizations. The Greeks for centuries used the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in schools to teach Greek virtues. So it is not surprising that later cultures that admired the Homeric epics created their own epics, imitating Homer’s style but conveying their own value systems. (#4-5)
Still, for all the epics written since Homer’s time and for all the ones composed before it, when we think of the word epic, we think primarily of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. 
The *Iliad* is the primary model for the epic of war. The *Odyssey* is the model for the epic of the long journey, as Odysseus makes his way home to *Ithaca*. The theme of the journey has been basic in Western literature – it is found in fairy tales, in such novels as *The Incredible Journey*, *Moby Dick*, and *The Hobbit*, and in such movies as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Star Wars*, *The Lion King*, and *Forrest Gump*. Thus, the *Odyssey* has been more widely read of Homer’s two great stories. (#3;6)
THE WAR-STORY BACKGROUND: VIOLENCE AND BRUTALITY

The background for Odysseus’ story is found in the *Iliad*, which is set in the tenth and final year of the Trojan War. According to the *Iliad*, the Greeks attacked Troy to avenge the insult suffered by Menelaus, king of Sparta, when his wife, Helen, ran off with Paris, a young prince of Troy. The Greek kings banded together under the leadership of Agamemnon, the brother of Menelaus. In 1,000 ships, they sailed across the Aegean Sea and encircled the walled city of Troy. (#8)
Listeners would have known that the Greeks were eventually victorious, that they gained entrance to Troy, reduced the city to smoldering ruins, and butchered all the inhabitants, except for those they took as slaves back to Greece. They would have known all about the greatest of the Greek warriors, Achilles, who was to die young in the final year of the war. They would especially have known about the homecoming of Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek forces, who was murdered by his unfaithful wife when he returned from Troy. (#9)
Finally, Homer’s listeners might well have been particularly fascinated by another homecoming story – this one about a somewhat unusual hero, known as much for his brain as for his brawn. In fact, many legends had already grown around this hero, whose name was Odysseus. He was the subject of Homer’s new epic, the *Odyssey*. 
ODYSSEUS: A HERO IN TROUBLE

Odysseus was a hero in trouble. We can relate to Odysseus because we share with him a sense of being somehow lost in a world of difficult choices. Like Odysseus, we have to cope with unfair authority figures. Like him, we have to work very hard to get what we want.
THE WOODEN-HORSE TRICK

Once in Troy, Odysseus performed extremely well as a soldier and commander. It was he, for example, who thought of the famous wooden-horse trick that would lead to the downfall of Troy. For ten years the Greeks had been fighting the Trojans, but they were fighting outside the Troy’s massive walls. They had been unable to break through the walls and enter the city. (#10)
Odysseus’ plan was to build an enormous wooden horse and hide a few Greek soldiers inside its hollow belly. After the horse was built, the Greeks pushed it up to the gates of Troy and withdrew their armies, so that their camp appeared to be abandoned. Thinking that the Greeks had given up the fight and that the horse was a peace offering, the Trojans brought the horse into their city. That night, the Greeks hidden inside the wooden body came out, opened the gates of Troy to the whole Greek army, and began the battle that was to win the war. (#7)
RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE GODS

This brings us to mythic and religious questions in the *Odyssey*. Myths are stories that use fantasy to express ideas about life that cannot be expressed easily in realistic terms. **Myths** are essentially religious because they are concerned with the relationship between human beings and the unknown or spiritual realm.
As you will see, Homer is always concerned with the relationship between humans and gods. Homer is religious: For him, the gods control all things. Athena, the goddess of wisdom, is always at the side of Odysseus. This is appropriate because Odysseus is known for his mental abilities. The god who works against Odysseus is Poseidon, the god of the sea, who is known for arrogance and a certain brutishness. (#12-13)
WHO WAS HOMER?

No one knows for sure who Homer was. The later Greeks believed he was a blind minstrel who came from the island of Chios. Some scholars feel there must have been two Homers; some think he was just a legend. But scholars have also argued about whether a man called Shakespeare ever existed. It is almost as if they were saying that Homer and Shakespeare are too good to be true. On the whole, it seems sensible to take the word of the Greeks themselves. We can at least accept the existence of Homer as a role model for a class of wandering bards or minstrels later called rhapsodes. (#14)