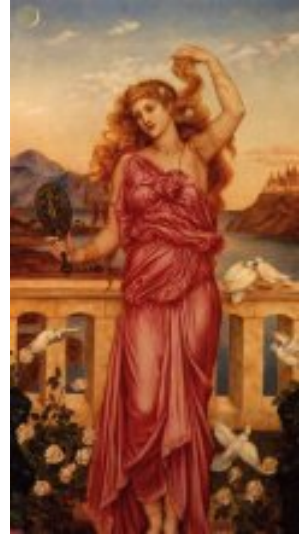


# The Iliad and the Odyssey, Part 1

By Vickie Chao

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Homer was the most famous poet in the whole of ancient Greece. But he was a mysterious man, too. For centuries, scholars had no idea exactly when he lived or where he was from. They could not even agree on whether he had actually existed at all! Despite the lingering questions, historians traditionally credit Homer with writing the two greatest epic poems of ancient Greece. They said that he wrote the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The *Iliad* (pronounced "IL-ee-ud") has 24 books and 16,000 lines. It describes vividly the final days of the Trojan War and introduces a character called Odysseus. The *Odyssey* (pronounced "AHD-ih-see") also has 24 books. But it is shorter, with only 11,300 lines. The *Odyssey* is like a sequel to the *Iliad*, for it centers on Odysseus and his struggle to get back home after the Trojan War.



Here is a brief account of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

A long, long time ago, there was a girl named Helen who lived in Greece. From a young age, her looks had been the talk of the town. No matter where she went, people always turned their heads to admire her. They all agreed that she was the prettiest girl in the world. Every young man -- both in and out of Greece -- dreamed of marrying her. One by one, they came to declare their love. As the competition grew fierce, Helen's father began to consider the suitors carefully. At last, he settled on Menelaus. Menelaus was the king of Sparta. His brother, Agamemnon (king of Mycenae), was the most powerful ruler in Greece.

Helen's father knew that his pick would break many hearts. To avoid troubles, he made all of Helen's admirers swear an oath. He made them promise that they would never take Helen away from Menelaus. If any of them did, the others would unite to get her back. At the time, this idea seemed marvelous. Helen and Menelaus got married without a hitch. Everybody else moved on with his own life. For a while, there was no snag. Soon, many of Helen's former suitors -- such as Odysseus -- forgot all about the vow. Years later, Odysseus became the king of Ithaca. He married Penelope. The two had a son called Telemachus. They were very happy.

Though Odysseus was able to put Helen out of his mind, Paris, a Trojan prince, was having a hard time with it. One day, a great opportunity arose. On that fateful day, three goddesses -- Athena (the goddess of wisdom), Aphrodite (the goddess of love), and Hera (the queen of all gods and goddesses) -- came to see Paris. They had only one question for him. Who among them was the most beautiful? Paris looked at them and was torn. He did not want to upset any deity. Yet when Aphrodite promised him the hand of Helen as his wife, the choice became clear. Right away, Paris declared that Aphrodite was the prettiest. The beaming goddess then used her power to make Helen fall in love with Paris. The two eloped and stole a lot of Menelaus' treasure. For several years, nobody knew where Helen and Paris were. Then, all of a sudden, they resurfaced and went back to Troy, Paris' home country. When word reached Menelaus, he asked all the former suitors of Helen's to honor the oath. Odysseus was, of course, on the roll call. He tried to avoid going. But he could not break a promise. So with a heavy heart, he bid his wife and son good-bye to join Menelaus in Aulis. Upon his arrival, he saw that a great number of heroes had already turned up. They were all busy preparing for the battle. Shortly after Odysseus docked his ships, he and the others met and exchanged pleasantries. Then, they got down to business. Agamemnon would be the leader of this military campaign. And Nestor, an ailing king from Pylos, would be his advisor. Once the plans were drawn up and the sacrifices were offered to the gods, they took sail and made their way to Troy.

The Trojans saw the Greeks coming. They tried to block the invaders from making landfall. But outnumbered, they could not fend them off forever. At last, they gave up and retreated behind the safety of their city wall. The Trojans lost their first round of fights.

Seeking to avoid further bloodshed, the Greeks wanted to make a truce. So they sent Odysseus, Menelaus, and, according to some, Acamas to reason with the Trojans. Their demand was fair. They wanted Helen and the stolen treasure back. As convincing as their arguments were, the Trojans refused to give in. They were very

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angry from the previous defeat. They shouted loudly at the visitors. As the situation turned dire, the three Greek ambassadors left in haste. The Trojans' stubbornness left the Greeks with no choice. Now, they would hold nothing back. They would launch an all-out assault on the city. They would not leave Troy until they recovered Helen and the stolen treasure.

The Greeks thought that it would be easy to capture Troy. But they were wrong. As the battle dragged on from months then to years, the Greeks finally came to realize that they could never take it by storm. To make matters worse, a plague had broken out in their camps. The illness killed many Greek soldiers and could strike down a lot more. All the Greeks knew the cause of the plague. They put the blame squarely on Agamemnon. He defied the mighty god Apollo and kept his priest's daughter as a war prize. His selfishness took a heavy toll on his force. When the death toll continued to rise and Agamemnon showed no signs of giving in, Achilles lashed out at his leader. He accused him of the disaster. Furious, Agamemnon snapped. He said that he would give up Chryseis if Achilles would replace her with Achilles' own favorite slave girl, Briseis. Achilles was very upset. But he eventually came around and agreed to hand over Briseis. He told Agamemnon that he was through with this whole war. He predicted that Agamemnon would one day see the value of losing him as a great warrior. With those parting words, Achilles turned and walked out of the Greek camps.

Later, Achilles recounted the ordeal with his mother, a sea nymph and a goddess by the name of Thetis. Thetis felt very sorry for her son. She went up Mount Olympus and laid out her case to Zeus, the king of all gods and goddesses. Upon hearing the story, Zeus felt very sorry for Achilles, too. He promised Thetis that he would take the matter into his own hands and give Achilles justice. That night, Zeus fixed a false dream and had it delivered to Agamemnon. The following morning, Agamemnon told his generals to prepare for an all-out attack on the Trojans. He boasted that the long-awaited victory would come today because he dreamed of it the night before.

Assured by the vision, the Greeks committed their entire force to this one great battle. But the Trojans were undeterred because Achilles was nowhere to be found. For the first time in the past nine years, the Trojans dared to challenge their enemies out in the open. As the two sides fought against each other fiercely, Paris found himself standing face-to-face in front of Menelaus. Though terrified by this encounter, Paris could not back away. So he offered to duel with Menelaus. The winner would get to keep Helen and the stolen treasure. Menelaus agreed. Suddenly, the battle stopped. The focus was now on the impending match. Paris took his time to launch his first strike, but he missed it. Then it was Menelaus' turn. Menelaus may not have been as dashing as Paris, but he was certainly a far better warrior. As a result, he quickly outflanked Paris and began to drag him toward the other Greeks. He thought he had the victory in hand. But suddenly Aphrodite appeared and cut Paris loose. Her action was the last straw for Athena and Hera; both goddesses were still quite upset after losing the beauty contest. So they weighed in to help the Greeks. Now, the Trojan War became a dispute not only among the mortals, but also among the immortals. On the Greeks' side, they had Athena, Hera, and Poseidon (the god of the oceans, earthquakes, and horses). On the Trojans' side, they had Apollo (the god of music, poetry, and archery), Aphrodite, and Ares (the god of war). Zeus tried to stay neutral, but he found the task increasingly difficult.

As the strife intensified, the Greeks started to lose ground. When Patroclus, Achilles' good friend, learned of this, he urged this mighty hero to recant his words. Achilles refused flat-out at first. But he eventually relented and loaned Patroclus his armor.

Patroclus stormed into the battle. Because of his mail, the Trojans thought Achilles had returned. They were terrified. So they began to flee. Patroclus chased after them all the way to Troy's city wall. When he tried to scale it, Apollo struck him down again and again. Finally, at the last blow, Achilles' armor fell apart and revealed the attacker's true identity. Hector -- Paris' brother and a great Trojan hero -- saw what was happening. He forced his way through the thickening crowd and finished off Patroclus. When Achilles heard of his friend's death, he was furious. He went to see Agamemnon, and the two struck up a deal. Agamemnon would compensate for Achilles' loss and let him be the new leader. In return, Achilles would forgive Agamemnon and stay on to fight for the Greeks.

Upon assuming the position as the commander-in-chief, Achilles made vengeance his first priority. In no time, he got his wish and slew the very man who killed Patroclus. But even this retaliation could not vent his anger. So he tied Hector's body behind a chariot and dragged him around for days. The Trojans were devastated. And the person who suffered the most was Hector's father, King Priam. To get his son back, he loaded a cart full of

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treasure and went to see Achilles. He poured his heart out to the young lad and begged him to let him take back Hector's body. Achilles felt very sorry for King Priam. Before releasing the corpse, he ordered the maids to wash and clothe this fallen hero. After that was done, King Priam brought his son back to Troy and gave him a fitting funeral.

Then the war resumed -- again!

The Iliad and the Odyssey, Part 1

## Questions

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Which of the following about the *Odyssey* is true?
- A. Many historians believe that Homer was the author of the *Odyssey*.
  - B. It is a novel.
  - C. It describes Menelaus' struggle to get back home after the Trojan War.
  - D. It gives detailed accounts about the final days of the Trojan War.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Of which kingdom was Odysseus the king?
- A. Ithaca
  - B. Troy
  - C. Pylos
  - D. Sparta
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. What was the cause of the Trojan War?
- A. Achilles slaughtered Hector.
  - B. Helen eloped with Paris.
  - C. Paris killed Agamemnon.
  - D. Odysseus stole Menelaus' treasure.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Which of the following deities was NOT on the Greeks' side during the Trojan War?
- A. Apollo
  - B. Poseidon
  - C. Athena
  - D. Hera
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Which of the following about Achilles is correct?
- A. Achilles joined the Trojans after he had an argument with Agamemnon.
  - B. Achilles avenged Patroclus for killing his good friend, Hector.
  - C. Achilles' mother was a sea nymph.
  - D. Achilles was the king of Troy.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Which of the following about Odysseus is correct?
- A. Odysseus' brother was Nestor.
  - B. Odysseus was the king of Sparta.
  - C. Odysseus was one of the ambassadors who had visited Troy at the beginning of the war.
  - D. Odysseus divorced Helen to marry Penelope.

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Who made Helen fall in love with Paris?
  - A. Zeus
  - B. Hera
  - C. Aphrodite
  - D. Ares
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Who was Helen's first husband?
  - A. Deiphobus
  - B. Menelaus
  - C. Agamemnon
  - D. Paris
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. How many more lines does the *Iliad* have than the *Odyssey*?
  - A. 7,300
  - B. 3,600
  - C. 4,700
  - D. 2,500
  
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Who saved Paris' life when he had a duel with Menelaus?
  - A. Aphrodite
  - B. Apollo
  - C. Ares
  - D. Achilles

**Imagine you were in the Trojan War. Which side would you want to be on? Explain why.**

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