**Iliad Background**

**Epic Poem**

*from the* Iliad

Homer (c. eighth century b.c. )

The ancient Greeks ascribed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey,* their two oldest, monumental epic poems, to Homer, whom they called simply “The Poet.” Nothing certain is known about Homer’s life. His name, which means “hostage,” gives no clue to his origins, since small wars and raids between neighboring towns were frequent in ancient Greece, and prisoners were routinely held for ransom or sold into slavery. Homer is commonly referred to as the “Ionian bard,” or poet; more than likely, he came from Ionia in the eastern Mediterranean, where Eastern and Western cultures met and new intellectual currents were born. In support of that theory, the *Iliad* contains several accurate descriptions of the Ionian landscape and its natural features, whereas Homer’s grasp of the geography of mainland Greece seems less authoritative.

**A Sightless Visionary**Legend has it that Homer was blind. This legend may have some basis in fact; if he lived to be an old man, he may simply have become blind. However, the idea of Homer’s blindness may have arisen because of its symbolic implications. The Greeks contrasted inner vision with physical vision, as in the case of the blind seer Teiresias and of Oedipus himself, who becomes blind in *Oedipus the King.* Also, Homer’s image—the blind bard singing the myths of his people—is a striking symbol for the beginning of Western literature.

**Heroes and Legends**Although it is not known for certain when Homer lived, the *Iliad* was almost certainly composed late in the eighth century b.c.Historically, however, both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* take place in a long-past heroic age known as the Late Bronze Age. One might wonder how Homer was able to depict an era five hundred years before his time. The answer is that Homer did not create the plot or characters of the epics he is credited with writing; rather, he inherited the stories of those epics. Generations of Greeks had preserved orally the subject matter of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—the story of the Trojan War and the heroic mythology that pervades both poems. As a result, Homer is the ultimate spokesman of a long and rich tradition of oral poetry developed over centuries.

From generation to generation, ancient Greek poets transmitted tales of warriors’ heroic deeds. Many of the stories were about those who fought in the war against Troy (twelfth or thirteenth century b.c. ). A bard might choose to sing about the exploits of a particular war hero, at Troy or elsewhere, about his homecoming, and about his ancestors or his descendants. In the world of Homer’s audience, the landed warrior aristocracy claimed descent from the heroes of legend and ultimately from the gods. For such a society, the legends about heroes formed a kind of tribal, and later national, family history.

**A Culture’s Identity**The *Iliad* was, in fact, considered history; children in the fifth century b.c. memorized large sections of the poem and practiced the ethical codes that Homer presents. Athenians even claimed the Homeric gods and heroes as founders or champions of Athens and its people. Homer’s epics also had a tremendous influence on later generations of Greek writers. Greek lyric poets, dramatists, and philosophers considered themselves Homer’s heirs, drawing on his work either to imitate it or to argue with it. As Greek culture spread through the eastern Mediterranean and west to Italy, Homer’s epics formed a common text for a large part of the Western world.

The Epic Form

Just as the oral tradition supplied Homer with a vast body of legend, it also provided him with the form and structure in which to express the legend. Although Homer was free to choose and shape the elements of the story according to his own vision, his language, meter, and style were formulaic. Over time, bards had developed a common fund of expressions, phrases, and descriptions that fit the rhythms of the epic verse line. These conventions became the building blocks of the epic genre.

**The Invocation *In Medias Res*** Homer begins the *Iliad* powerfully by stating the epic’s theme and invoking one of the Muses. The Muses are nine goddesses in Greek mythology who were believed to preside over all forms of art and science. The poet calls on the Muse to inspire him with the material he needs to tell his story. This type of opening is one of the defining features of a Homeric epic.

Homer observes another epic convention by beginning the story *in medias res,* which is Latin for “in the middle of things.” Reading a Greek epic from the beginning is like tuning in to a story already in progress, in that many of the story’s events have already taken place. Information about those events is revealed later in the poem through flashbacks and other narrative devices. Homer could begin his poems *in medias res* because the general outline of the plot and the main characters were already familiar to his audience. The*Iliad,* like other epics, is a small fragment of a large body of legendary material that formed the cultural and historical heritage of its society.

**Homeric Epithets**The particular demands of composing and listening to oral poetry gave rise to the use of stock descriptive words or phrases, such as “brilliant Achilles” or “Hector breaker of horses.” These epithets, often compound adjectives like “blazing-eyed Athena,” allowed the poet to describe an object or a character quickly and economically, in terms his audience would recognize. Homeric epithets and other formulaic language may have helped the poet shape his story and compose while reciting, and the repetition of familiar expressions also would have helped the audience follow the narrative.

**How the War Began**

The *Iliad* recounts only part of a long series of events in the Trojan War, which was fought, according to legend, because of a quarrel among gods and the resulting incidents of betrayal among mortals. How did the war start? King Peleus and the sea-goddess Thetis were the parents of Achilles, hero of the*Iliad.* When Peleus and Thetis were married, all the gods were invited except Eris, the goddess of discord. Angry at being excluded, Eris tossed a golden apple among the guests; on it was inscribed “for the fairest one.” Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite each claimed the prize. They chose the Trojan prince Paris, a handsome and unworldly man, to decide which goddess was the fairest. Each goddess offered him a bribe, and Paris chose Aphrodite’s: She promised to give him the most beautiful woman alive, Helen, who was already married to Menelaus, king of Sparta.

Paris violated the sacred bond of hospitality when he went to Menelaus’ court as a guest and abducted the host’s wife. Menelaus sought the help of his brother Agamemnon, king of Mycenae and the most powerful ruler of his time. Together with other kings, they mounted an expedition against Troy, to reclaim Helen and to sack a city famed for its opulence. The war lasted for ten years until Troy was finally taken.

Out of a vast body of material that his audience knew, Homer chose to focus on a period of less than two months in the tenth year of the war. Homer did not concentrate on the war as such, but on the Greek warrior Achilles and the consequences of his rage.

**Preview**

**Connecting to the Literature**

When you read the epics of Homer, you take part in a cultural tradition that spans more than two thousand years. Generations of writers, from Shakespeare to Sting, have been inspired by and have alluded to Homer. The warriors in the *Iliad* are from a distant time and culture, yet many of their basic concerns will be familiar to you.

**Literary Analysis**

**Theme**

The **theme** of a literary work is its central idea, concern, or message. Long works, such as novels and epics, often contain more than one major theme. For example, the theme stated at the beginning of the *Iliad* is “the rage of Peleus’ son Achilles” and its consequences, but the poem also contains profound insights about war and peace, honor, duty, compassion, and life and death. Among the means Homer uses to reveal these themes are the following:

* characters’ statements and actions
* events in the plot
* images and their associations

As you read, note the ideas and insights that the poem conveys.

**Connecting Literary Elements**

The *Iliad’* s opening statement of theme is also its first instance of **fore- shadowing,** the use of clues to suggest future events in a literary work. This technique creates suspense by building the audience’s anticipation. For example, the *Iliad’* s opening lines leave the reader wondering why Achilles is enraged and what consequences might follow. Look for other examples of foreshadowing as you read, and consider what effect the poet is trying to create.

**Reading Strategy**

**Analyze Confusing Sentences**

Homer wove lines dense with images and other details. To **analyze confusing sentences,** consider one section at a time. Look at a complex sentence, and separate its essential parts (the *who* and *what* ) from the difficult language until you get to the main idea. As you read, use a chart like the one shown to help you analyze and interpret the meaning of difficult sentences.

