Biographical Details: Homer

- Probably composed “The Iliad” and “The Odyssey” around 750 BC
- These epics were written down years later, likely after his death, as the Greek alphabet was just coming into being during Homer’s lifetime. Homer was an oral poet who recited his poems aloud (thus the need for epithets to help the speaker keep his place through these very long poems).
- “The Iliad” and “The Odyssey” are two of the earliest surviving epic poems.
- “The Iliad” tells of the ten year long Trojan War, and “The Odyssey” tells of Odysseus’ ten year journey home after the war was won.
- Not much is known about Homer: Was he blind? Was he illiterate? Was his name really Homer? Was “he” actually a woman?

Trojan War

- Mythology, though there was a war in Troy about 500 years before Homer composed his epics. The city was destroyed by fire, however, so it’s clear that while Homer may have taken some details from a real war, the tales he told were fiction/mythology.
- Waged by the Achaeans (people from a Greek city-state) on the Trojans (modern day Turkey)

Conventions of the Genre of Epic

**genre**: a category of literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content

**examples of genre**: fiction, non-fiction, poetry, drama, epic poetry. Fiction can even be further delineated by **genre**: historical fiction, science fiction, realistic fiction, fantasy, mystery, etc.

What makes an epic an epic?

- long, narrative poem
- speaker is a narrator who tells a story
- the setting is expansive, rather than limited (the whole world vs. your hometown)
- the protagonist is a hero
- hero usually has a goal and a long journey ensues
- hero struggles with gods, monsters, and humans as **antagonists**
- gods take part (help/hurt the hero’s cause) or at least take an interest in the action
- **purpose**: to entertain, teach, inspire
• begins with an **invocation** to a **muse** or the muses, typically to Calliope, the muse of epic poetry
• action starts **in medias res**
• **tone** = formal
• contains **Homeric** or **epic similes**

**Vocabulary Tested:** epic, archetype, Homeric or epic simile, epithet, dramatic irony, tragic flaw, symbol, dactylic hexameter, foreshadowing, epic hero, tragic hero, genre, protagonist, main character, antagonist, purpose, invocation, in medias res, muse, tone (these terms are in addition to other vocabulary listed on second semester study guides)

**Hero** can be used simply as a synonym for **main character or protagonist**. Heroes can be male or female; however, an **epic hero** is traditionally male. A **tragic hero** encounters obstacles and eventually meets his end due to a **tragic flaw**: a characteristic that usually helps the hero be admirable, meet with success, and overcome obstacles (stubbornness, ambition, anger, pride, compassion, ability to love and be loved) but when found in excess can lead to his demise. Be able to **articulate and/or identify** Odysseus’ **tragic flaws**.

**Dactylic Hexameter**
Works in Greek, not in English; the original epics in Greek are in dactylic hexameter. When they’re translated into English, scholars often use iambic pentameter instead, though some modern translations do not use a regular rhyme scheme & others translate from poetry into prose.

**Dactylic:** means “finger” in Greek, one long joint and two short joints. That’s the syllable pattern; long, short, short.

**Hexameter:** poetic meter with six measures.

**Dactylic Hexameter:** five groups of one long syllable followed by two short **plus** one more group of **either** long + long **or** long + short

**long syllable:** has long vowel or dipthong or short vowel followed by more than one consonant

**short syllable:** short vowel followed by only one consonant

**Themes in “The Odyssey”**
• heroism
• love
• human life
• brain v. brawn
• honor
• revenge
• hospitality
• faithfulness (especially in marriage)/loyalty
• fate v. free will
• identity
• importance of family bonds

Symbols in “The Odyssey”
• the sea
• Laertes’ shroud
• Odysseus’ bow
• Argos (dog)
• disguises
• dreams
• food/banquets
• Odysseus’ and Penelope’s bed

Key Characters You Must Be Able to Identify/Describe
• Odysseus
• Penelope
• Telemachus
• Scylla: 4 eyes, 6 heads, 3 rows of teeth in each mouth
• Charybdis: face is all mouth, limbs = flippers
• Polyphemus
• Circe
• Calypso
• Sirens
• Laertes
• Poseidon
• Zeus
• Antinous
• Athena

Key Settings: You Must Be Able to Tell What Occurred in These Locations
• Aeaea: Circe’s island home
• Ogygia: Calypso’s home
• island of the Lotus Eaters
• island of the Cyclopes
• Helios’ island
• Ithaca