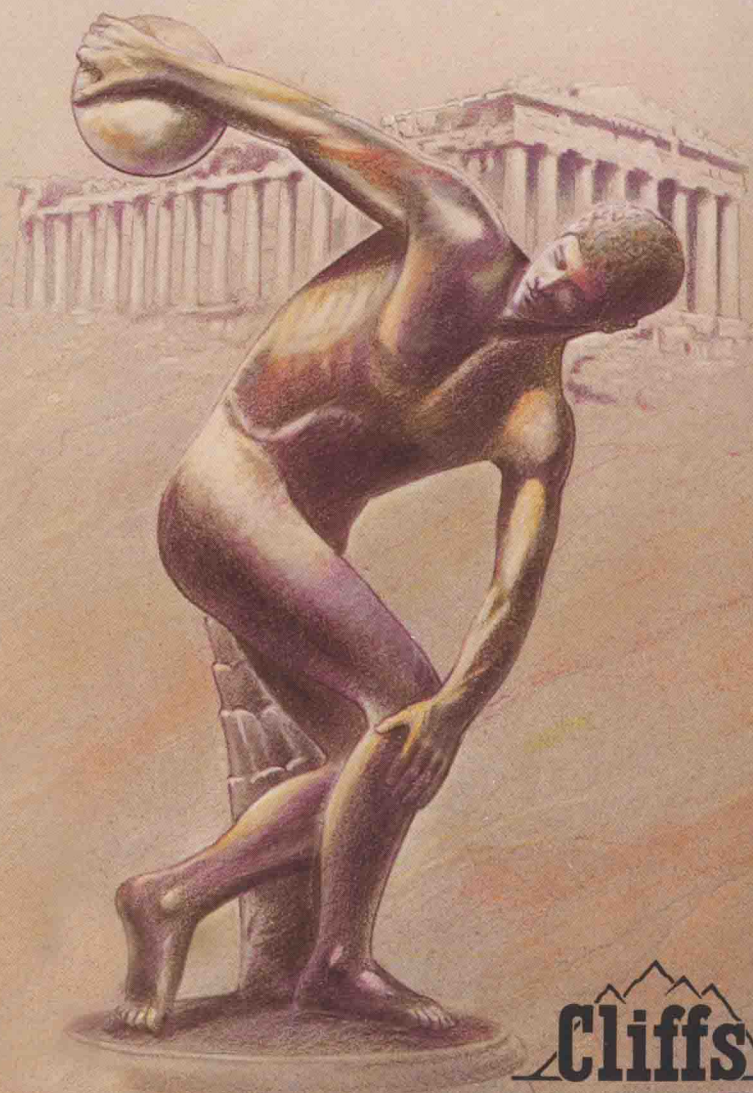


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# GREEK CLASSICS



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# GREEK CLASSICS

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# GREEK CLASSICS

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Death Mask of Agamemnon  
*National Archeological Museum, Athens*





### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Mary Ellen Snodgrass** earned her B.A. in British and classical literature from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, her M.A. in English from Appalachian State University, and certification in gifted education from Lenoir-Rhyne College. A member of the American Classical League, Virgilian Society, Phi Beta Kappa, AFT, NCTE, and IRA, she taught English and Latin at Hickory High School for twenty years and has served as chairman of the English department, coordinator of language arts for the Hickory City Schools, reader for the North Carolina Textbook Commission, and writer, editor, and consultant for major textbook publishers. Her published works include *Cliffs Teaching Portfolios* as well as articles for *Islands* magazine, the Presbyterian Center, ERIC, and other professional groups. She was contributing editor of *The Short Story and You* (National Textbook) and *The Great American English Handbook* (Perma-Bound).

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## INTRODUCTION

Woven into the graceful folds of Greek literature are the classic concepts, motifs, and markings which Western civilization has adopted as its own. The Greeks knew a joy and facility with language, an admiration for clean lines and spare sentences. Their worship of the poet's gift approached religious fervor. To the ancient Athenian, attendance at a drama festival was more than entertainment; it was a purging of the soul, a union with goodness and truth. Likewise, to read Homer was to experience the best in human thought and behavior.

No other era has produced so notable an array of genius—the bold epics of Homer, Sappho's diaphanous images, Aristophanes' mirthful satires, and the poignant, gripping dramas of Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus. To these must be added the all-encompassing philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, the keen histories and self-criticism of Herodotus and Thucydides, as well as Aesop's droll beast fables. Despite the passage of centuries, Greek literature retains its freshness and relevance, its ability to pierce to the heart of human situations in matters of love or war, government or social behavior. On most subjects, the Greeks said it first and said it well.

Our lives bear little likeness to Attica's Mediterranean existence, where tiny city-states experimented with systems of government and struggled to keep out a succession of aggressors. Why, then, does Greek thought permeate our every endeavor—from art, architecture, dance, and drama to philosophy, politics, science, and religion? Primarily because we often feel that we must escape twentieth-century complexity and self-doubt and reconnect our ties with the simple humanistic truths which formed the warp and woof of ancient thought.

The Greeks, adhering to the simple injunction, "Know thyself," were strong in self-awareness. Practical and perceptive, their early myths still challenge the modern mind, leading us to contemplate anew the spark of human fire which Prometheus stole from Olympian gods to brighten the dim prehistoric soul. The depiction of human ills escaping from Pandora's box, the pitiable cry of Icarus, tumbling to his death in the blue Aegean waters, and Phaethon's youthful body

pierced by his father's thunderbolt bring into focus the ever-present human failing of pride.

There is much that separates the modern world from that earlier time. There are no firesides decked with skins where audiences lose themselves in the singer's recounting of the epic struggles of Jason and Theseus or the tearful complaints of Penelope and Hecuba. The magic, then, lies not in performance, but in the lines themselves, translated from an ancient tongue into myriad languages, still binding us to the wisdom and the humanity of a people long dead. The challenge of Greek literature remains a pinnacle which each generation climbs. From these heights come inner views, glimpses of human capability and foible. From these voices come a candor and a passion unequalled in modern times.



# **GREEK EPIC POETRY**

- **Homer**
- **Hesiod**



# HOMER

- Homer and the Epic
- The *Iliad*
- The *Odyssey*





# HOMER

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## LIFE AND BACKGROUND

There is no question that the writer of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* was one of the greatest poets in the history of Western Europe, but little else can be said with certainty about Homer, particularly concerning his personal life. Obviously, he made his living as a bard, or *rhapsode*, an itinerant singer of verses. Ancient Greek tradition, as well as a study of the language and style of the poems, indicates that he probably lived and wrote sometime in the ninth or eighth centuries B.C., but no more definite date can be determined.

In ancient times, seven different cities claimed the honor of having been Homer's birthplace. None of these assertions can be validated, but more than likely, he came from the island of Chios, on the western coast of Asia Minor, for in historical times, a family of the same name lived there, claimed him as an ancestor, and devoted themselves to the recitation of his works. Seemingly, Homer was a native and a resident of some section of Asia Minor, for the dialect in which he composed his works—a blend of Ionic and Aeolic—is that of the Asian Greeks.

Tradition has visualized Homer as blind, but there is no real evidence for this belief. It is based upon the portrayal of Demodocus, a blind minstrel in the *Odyssey*, who sings a poem about the fall of Troy. There is no reason, however, to believe that the poet was describing himself in this scene. Throughout the two epics, there is no consistent autobiographical information, and no other literature of the period survives which describes the poet.

The early Greeks unhesitatingly insisted that there had been a single individual named Homer, to whom they ascribed the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and several minor works, including the *Homeric Hymns* (a series of poems addressed to various gods), *The Battle of the Frogs and Mice* (a poem of 303 hexameters), and *Margites*, a comic romance about the adventures of a simpleton. However, around the third century B.C.,



the so-called Homeric Question was first propounded. Several of the grammarians of the time asserted that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were actually composed by two different writers. At various times, this view has been supported by later European critics. There has also been a school of thought, especially popular in the nineteenth century, which claims that Homer, whose name means *hostage*, never existed, and that the two epics are the collective works of groups of anonymous bards to whom the name Homer was later applied. These scholars suggest that the two poems were revised whenever they were recited and did not reach their present form until the sixth century B.C. when, in Athens, they were written down for the first time.

In general, contemporary scholars maintain that each of the two poems has a consistency of style and outlook that indicates that they are the work of one writer. The poet may have composed them completely, or he may have utilized parts of the work of some earlier bards, altering them to fit his own purposes and making them fully his own in the process. But since the people nearest to the composition of the poems believed them to have been the product of one hand, the modern critic has accepted this view and has attributed the differences between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to their having been composed at different stages in the poet's life and to the differences in the themes of the works. Rather than take a defensive or apologetic position, the contemporary scholar insists that the burden of proof is on those who deny the existence of Homer. To date, this position has not been successfully challenged.

While little if anything is known of Homer's life, his works are an everlasting tribute to him. For thousands of years, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have been the standards by which poets of all languages have measured themselves, and, for understanding human nature in all its aspects, for keen observation of the whole world in which men live, for essential sanity and good taste, and for superb control of all the technical devices of his medium, Homer has never been surpassed.

