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Homer

Two of the most famous epic poems in Western literature have been attributed to his name, yet history does not even clearly show that a man named Homer ever existed. Traditions dating as far back as the fifth century BC Greece claim that a blind poet named Homer wrote the famous poems *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and various towns along the Ionian coast claim to be his birthplace, yet there is no historical evidence to support any of these claims. Some scholars have even questioned whether or not *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were written by the same person.

Studies of the language used in the poems reveal that *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were written during the eighth century BC, by a poet who lived in Asia Minor. Modern scholars generally agree that *The Iliad* was entirely written by one man, who could certainly have been named Homer. Many also believe that *The Odyssey* could have been written by this same poet. It is, however, unlikely that it will ever be known for certain.

Before writing was common, legends and stories were passed on orally. These legends described historical events and battles, love stories, tales of the gods and other magnificent and wonderful heroes. Often, to aid the memory, these legends were composed into poetry, and given a particular rhythm. Both *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* are classic examples of this sort of traditional epic poetry.

Each chronicles the experiences of grand and glorious heroes, who undergo fabulous adventures. In *The Iliad*, the Trojan War is used as a stage for the adventures of a cast of gods, warriors, heroes, beautiful women, loyal friends, and jealous lovers. In *The Odyssey*—which takes place immediately after *The Iliad*—the fantastic adventures of Odysseus are described, as he journeys home to his loyal wife Penelope after over ten years away fighting in the Trojan War.

Scholars believe that *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were both popular traditional poems, which had been handed down for generations. A poet would memorize the poem, and then make any stylistic changes that he felt were appropriate. In this way, each poem was a constantly changing reflection of current trends and taste. As literacy became more common, however, poets began to write down their poetry, and thus preserve it. Homer, or the poet who first recorded these two great epics, would have been a talented oral poet, who took these traditional tales and captured them in writing.

These two poems were wildly popular all throughout ancient Greece. Even after they were safely preserved in writing, as late as in the 2nd century BC, schoolchildren were regularly required to memorize part or all of the poems, in order to better appreciate the beauty and rhythm of the language.

Although the stories may not have been original, the poems bear the personal mark of the poet. Stylistic similarities run throughout each poem. The high quality of the language, the rhythm, and the beautiful poetic images created by his words rendered these perhaps the most popular poems of all time.

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Comprehension

Read the following questions based on the text, and select the best answer.

1. Which of the following is commonly accepted to be true?
 - a. A blind poet named Homer lived during the 8th century BC.
 - b. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were not written by a man named Homer.
 - c. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were written in Asia Minor.
 - d. Homer was born in a town on the Ionian seacoast.

2. Why were poems like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* passed on orally?
 - a. Reading and writing were not common.
 - b. The poems were a reflection of current tastes and trends.
 - c. The legends were set into poetry, to aid the memory.
 - d. Traveling poets would tell the legends to the people.

3. Which of the following best describes *The Iliad*?
 - a. a historical account of the Trojan War
 - b. a play meant to be acted out, relating the story of the Trojan War
 - c. military advice, shown through descriptions of the Trojan War
 - d. a story of the adventures of heroes and gods, set during the Trojan War

4. Which best describes the story of *The Odyssey*?
 - a. the adventures of a warrior journeying home from the Trojan War
 - b. the story of a man whose wife, Penelope, fought in the Trojan War
 - c. the story of the warrior Odysseus during the Trojan War
 - d. the life story of a man named Odysseus

5. Which of the following was NOT true of oral poetry?
 - a. Poems were a constant reflection of current trends and tastes.
 - b. For historical accuracy, a poem was always told in the exact same way.
 - c. Poems described fantastic characters such as gods and heroes.
 - d. A poem changed slightly with each poet who memorized it.

6. Which of the following is evidence of the popularity of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*?
 - a. They are written in a beautiful style.
 - b. They are excellent examples of rhythmic poetry.
 - c. Schoolchildren were required to memorize them.
 - d. They were recorded from oral traditions.

7. According to the text, which of the following is true of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*?
 - a. The quality of the language is high, and the poetic images are beautiful.
 - b. The characters are sensitive and struggle with religion.
 - c. The poems reflect the tastes of the poet who first composed them.
 - d. They are excellent historical records of the Trojan War.

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Answer Key for Homer

1. c
2. a
3. d
4. a
5. b
6. c
7. a