



Ballads and The Oral Tradition

Telling the stories of our people

In the Beginning...

- Thousands of years ago and many miles away, in the ancient lands of Greece, men and women told stories of their ancestors - of their gods and heroes, their pasts and their principles - stories which were handed-down to their children and their children's children.
- Soldiers told these stories to one another around campfires; mothers sang of them to their children; farmers regaled each other with these tales as they brought in the harvest - they formed the fabric of the lives of everyday people in the ancient world.
- Over time, these stories, these myths and legends were honed into the great moral and theological myths which we know today - primarily because they were written down by the finest poet in ancient times: Homer.

Ὅμηρος

- Little is known about Homer the man. Scholars debate his life but it is generally accepted that he wrote two of the most famous epic poems in history:
- *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.



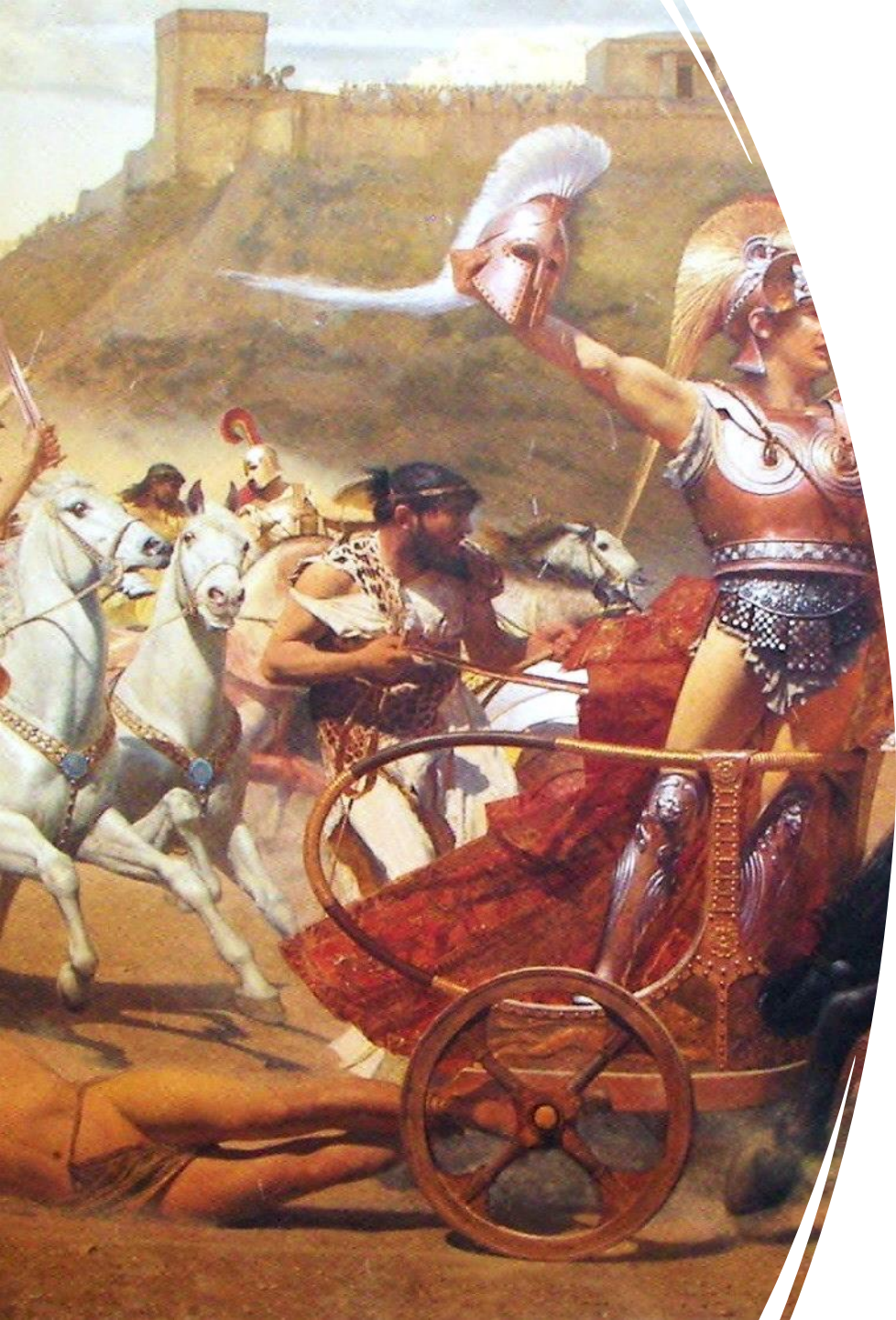
Iliad

- This epic poem tells the story of the Trojan War.
- In it, we meet many famous heroes, such as Achilles, Patroclus, Odysseus and Hector.
- These heroes teach the reader about those things which the Greeks valued the most:
 - Heroism
 - Patriotism
 - Honouring one's ancestors
 - Legacy (known to the ancients as *kleos* / κλεος)
 - Piety
 - Hospitality - respect for one's guests and one's hosts
- We also encounter Greek gods and goddesses, who all have an important role to play in the development of the story. Their intervention often ensures that the virtues outlined above are rewarded, whilst contravention of these virtues is punished.



The Story:

- The story begins near the end of the Trojan War, which the Greeks have been waging against Troy for over ten years.
- Weary and battle-fatigued, the Greeks are losing hope of ever vanquishing their enemy.
- There are many ongoing intrigues and manoeuvres which lead up to the finale of the story - some of which you might like to read about yourselves!
- We, however, are going to pick up the story at one of its most famous passages and learn about two great warriors: Hector and Achilles...



"Who dragged whom around the walls of what?"

- The above question is one which could once have been answered by every schoolboy and schoolgirl in Britain!
- "Who dragged whom around the walls of what?" has only one proper response - and you should learn it:
 - *"Achilles dragged Hector around the walls of Troy!"*

Hector and Achilles

- Hector is the greatest warrior in the Trojan army and Achilles is the finest warrior of the Greeks.
- Enraged at the ongoing atrocities of the war and determined to avenge the many wrongs committed upon his people by the Greeks, Hector dons the armour of his dead best friend, Patroclus and decides to challenge Achilles to a duel.
- Kissing his wife, Andromache, and his son, Astyanax, goodbye, Hector sets forth towards the Greek camp.
- At first, Achilles is terrified, as he cannot understand how the dead Patroclus can be walking towards him. Realising that it is a trick, however, Achilles challenges Hector and chases him around the walls of the city of Troy.
- Eventually, Hector has to act. He turns to fight Achilles who, aided by the goddess Athena, overcomes the Trojan warrior and pierces him with his spear. Hector perishes and Achilles celebrates his triumph.
- The victorious Achilles chains the body of Hector to his chariot and drags it around the walls of Troy. Such desecration of the body of a noble foe offends the gods, who are horrified at the impious actions of the Greek warrior.

Lesson One:

- Select one of the following activities:
 1. Using books and the internet to help you, research the origins of the Trojan War. Look up the names Paris, Helen, Agamemnon and Odysseus and explain how their actions led to a war between the Trojans and the Greeks;
 2. Research the city of Troy, the ruins of which are found in modern-day Turkey. Draw a layout of the city and label its principle features.
 3. Choose one of the characters whom you have met so far and imagine that you are interviewing them. You can do this either in writing (for a newspaper) or as a television interview (using video).

Homer and the Oral Tradition (1):

- In the days before written texts were common, most stories were told orally and passed-down from father to son, from mother to daughter.
- Many of the stories were repeated over several nights, around a campfire, agora or hearth.
- In order for those listening to be able to remember the characters, **adjective prefixes** (known as "Homeric Epithets") were regularly added to character's names to remind the audience of each character's particular traits:
 - Cunning Odysseus
 - Noble Achilles
 - Wise Penelope
 - White-armed Helen
- These Homeric Epithets give an indication of the most important aspects of each character.

Homer and the Oral Tradition (2):

- In order for the person reciting the poem to remember its key elements, the poems of *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were written in dactylic hexameter. This means that each word with a long syllable is followed by two short syllables.
- This form of poetry is extremely structured and rhythmic - it lends itself beautifully to recitation.
- The events of the poems often rely upon *Deus Ex Machina* - supernatural intervention from gods or goddesses which move the action forward.
- Fundamental ancient virtues, such as *kleos*, piety, respect for one's ancestors, respect for the dead, loyalty and patriotism are all rewarded by the gods; failure to comply with these virtues results in divine punishment.
- Any character or society which fails to abide by these virtues is doomed to fail: a fact which is as true today as it was three-and-a-half thousand years ago.

The Death of Hector

- Here is a short extract from *Iliad*. How many of the features of the oral tradition can you find? Highlight and label them:

Athene deceived Hector with her words and her disguise, and led him on till he and Achilles met. Hector of the gleaming helm spoke first: 'I will not run from you, as before, son of Peleus. My heart failed me as I waited for your attack, and three times round Priam's city we ran, but now my heart tells me to stand and face you, to kill or be killed. Come let us swear an oath before the gods, for they are the best witnesses of such things. If Zeus lets me kill you and survive, then when I've stripped you of your glorious armour I'll not mistreat your corpse, I'll return your body to your people, if you will do the same for me.'

Swift-footed Achilles glared at him in reply: 'Curse you, Hector, and don't talk of oaths to me. Lions and men make no compacts, nor are wolves and lambs in sympathy: they are opposed, to the end. You and I are beyond friendship: nor will there be peace between us till one or the other dies and sates Ares, lord of the ox-hide shield, with his blood. Summon up your reserves of courage, be a spearman now and a warrior brave. There is no escape from me, and soon Athene will bring you down with my spear. Now pay the price for all my grief, for all my friends you've slaughtered with your blade.'

So saying he raised his long-shadowed spear and hurled it. But glorious Hector kept an eye on it and, crouching, dodged so the shaft flew above him, and the point buried itself in the ground behind. Yet Pallas Athene snatched it up and returned it to Achilles, too swiftly for Prince Hector to see. And Hector spoke to Peleus' peerless son: 'It seems you missed, godlike Achilles, despite your certainty that Zeus has doomed me. It was mere glibness of speech, mere verbal cunning, trying to unnerve me with fright, to make me lose strength and courage. You'll get no chance to pierce my back as I flee; so, if the gods allow you, drive it through my chest as I attack, dodge my bronze spear if you can. I pray it lodges deep in your flesh! If you were dead, our greatest bane, war would be easy for us Trojans.'

So saying, he raised and hurled his long-shadowed spear, striking Achilles' shield square on, though the spear simply rebounded. Hector was angered by his vain attempt with the swift shaft, and stood there in dismay, lacking a second missile.



Lesson Two:

- Look back to the research task you completed.
- You are now going to use some of the information you found to create a short ballad piece of your own.
- Choose a character from Homer's *Iliad* or create one of your own. Using the tropes about which you have learned and the characters whom you have discovered, write a short, first person (i.e.: from the "I" perspective) poem about your experiences.
- Be as creative as you can and remember to include lots of historical and Homeric detail.

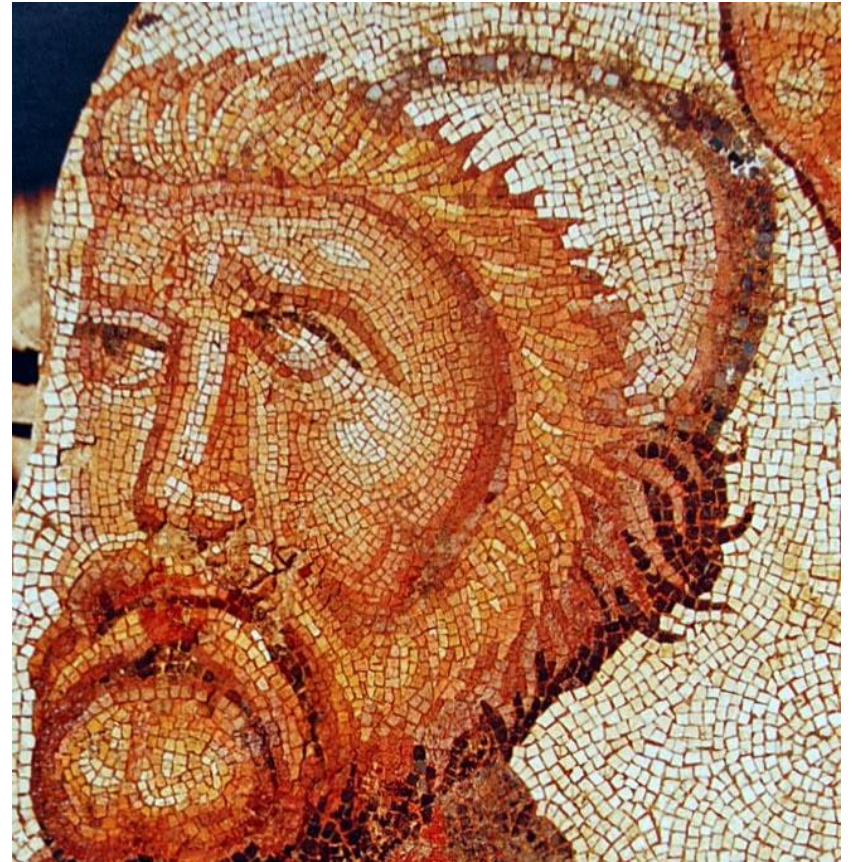
Odyssey

- This epic poem tells the aftermath of the Trojan War, in which the hero, Odysseus, King of Ithaca, tries desperately to get back to his ancestral homeland.
- Odysseus' cunning leads to the eventual overthrow of the Trojans. After their defeat, his only desire is to return home to his wife, Penelope and his son, Telemachus.



Odysseus' challenges:

- After the Fall of Troy, Odysseus desires nothing more than to return to Ithaca - but his journey is constantly thwarted.
- He confronts whirlpools and waves, lustful goddesses and vengeful gods, tricks and his own weaknesses. It takes him a further ten years to reach his homeland.



Homer and the Oral Tradition (3):

- We have already seen how Homer uses Homeric Epithets and dactylic hexameter to make the poem memorable.
- We have also seen how the morals of the poem reflect the virtues of the society in which it was based. Ancient Greeks valued:
 - Heroism
 - Patriotism
 - Honouring one's ancestors
 - Legacy (known to the ancients as *kleos* / κλεος)
 - Piety
 - Hospitality - respect for one's guests and one's hosts (*xenia* / ξενια)
- *Odyssey* develops these values and shows how failure to adhere to them leads to divine punishment and, ultimately, death.

Lesson Three:

- Choose one of the following activities:
 1. Using books and the internet to help you, research the story of Odysseus' journey. Plot a chronological (in time order) map of his adventures;
 2. Use a map of Europe to plot Odysseus' journey from Troy to Ithaca. Label your map with the principle locations in the story.

Penelope: Keeping the Home Fires Burning

- *Odyssey* tells the story of Odysseus' trials as he wends his way back to his homeland of Ithaca.
- Whilst he is having his adventures, his wife, Penelope, remains at home on the island and raises their son, Telemachus.
- After the Trojan Wars end, most people assume that Odysseus is dead but Penelope refuses to believe that this is possible.
- Her home is inundated with suitors - men who wish to marry her and steal all of the wealth accrued by Odysseus, which would then be inherited by Telemachus.
- The suitors take advantage of Penelope's hospitality. Greek custom requires her to show hospitality to all who come to Ithaca - even to the detriment of her own people.
- The suitors attack her maids, drink her wine, slaughter her sheep and plot to replace her son.
- Penelope has to use all of her wisdom to keep the suitors at bay - she is as wise as her husband is cunning.
- The suitors try to bully her into choosing one of them to marry, so Penelope devises a plan to keep them at bay: she begins to weave a shroud for her father-in-law, Laertes and tells the suitors that she will wed one of them once it is completed... but every night she unpicks the work she has done, so that the shroud is never finished.
- This plan works well for a long time, until she is betrayed by her maid, Melantho of the pretty cheeks. Melantho tells Eurymachus, one of the suitors, what Penelope has been doing and the suitors then insist that she choose one of them to marry.
- Before she is forced to make her choice, however, Odysseus returns and sees the havoc that the suitors have wrought upon his homeland. With the help of Telemachus, he plots his revenge...

Penelope weaving her shroud:

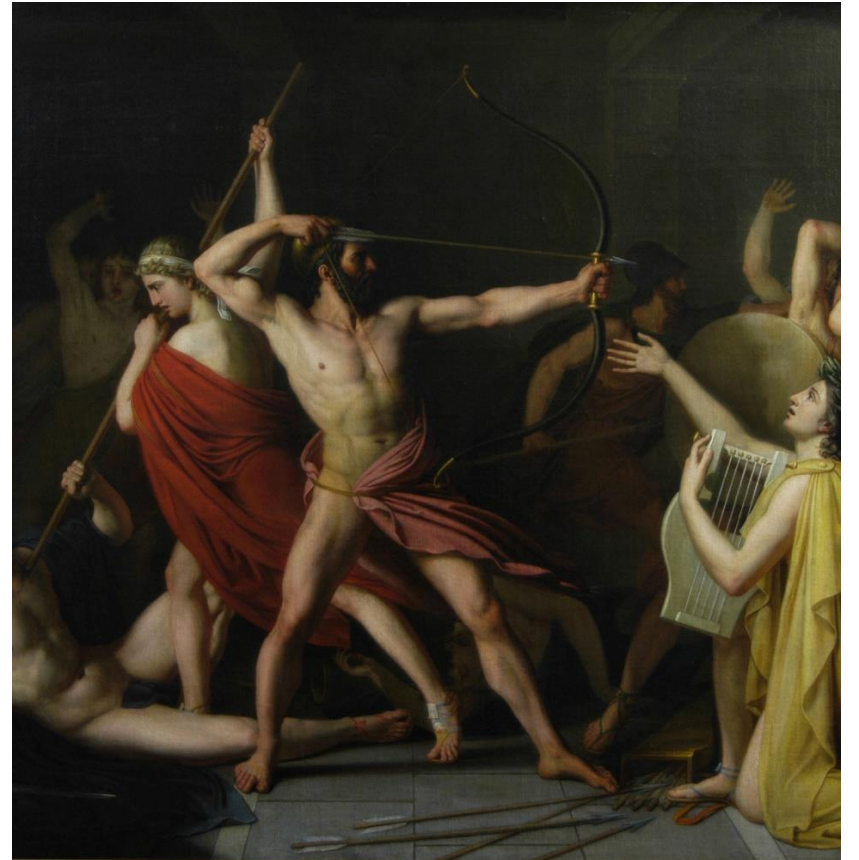
- This image, taken from a Grecian urn, shows Penelope's deception being uncovered by Eurymachus.



Odysseus Returns:

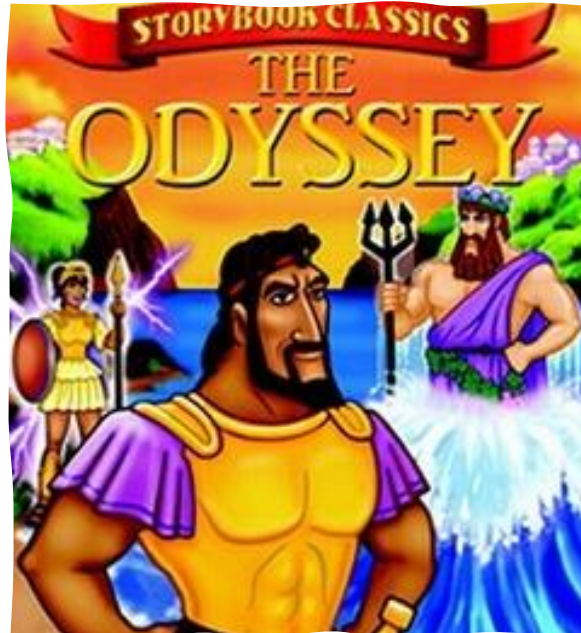
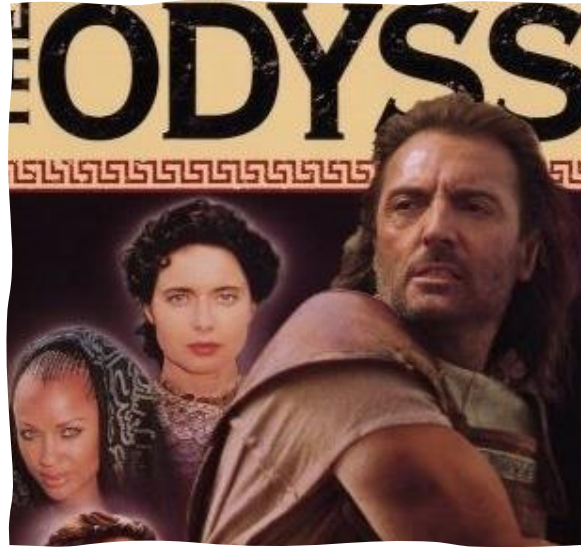
- Odysseus finally returns to Ithaca and, disguised as a beggar, he enters his house and sees first hand the devastation that the unwelcome visitors have caused.
- The following passage shows Odysseus' fury and his revenge.
- He makes himself known to the suitors; throwing-off his disguise, he accuses them of abusing the *xenia* of his home and of taking advantage of his wife, son and servants.
- When you read through the following passages, see how many Homeric traits and examples of Greek virtue you can find.

- Then with an angry glance from beneath his brows Odysseus of many wiles answered him: "Eurymachus, not even if you should give me in requital all that your fathers left you, even all that you now have, and should add other wealth thereto from whence ye might, not even so would I henceforth stay my hands from slaying until the wooers had paid the full price of all their transgression. [65] Now it lies before you to fight in open fight, or to flee, if any man may avoid death and the fates; but many a one, methinks, shall not escape from utter destruction." So he spoke, and their knees were loosened where they stood, and their hearts melted; and Eurymachus spoke among them again a second time: [70] "Friends, for you see that this man will not stay his invincible hands, but now that he was got the polished bow and the quiver, will shoot from the smooth threshold until he slays us all, come, let us take thought of battle. Draw your swords, and hold the tables before you against [75] the arrows that bring swift death, and let us all have at him in a body, in the hope that we may thrust him from the threshold and the doorway, and go throughout the city, and so the alarm be swiftly raised; then should this fellow soon have shot his last."
- So saying, he drew his sharp sword [80] of bronze, two-edged, and sprang upon Odysseus with a terrible cry, but at the same instant goodly Odysseus let fly an arrow, and struck him upon the breast beside the nipple, and fixed the swift shaft in his liver. And Eurymachus let the sword fall from his hand to the ground, and writhing over the table [85] he bowed and fell, and spilt upon the floor the food and the two-handled cup. With his brow he beat the earth in agony of soul, and with both his feet he spurned and shook the chair, and a mist was shed over his eyes. Then Amphinomus made at glorious Odysseus, [90] rushing straight upon him, and had drawn his sharp sword, in hope that Odysseus might give way before him from the door. But Telemachus was too quick for him, and cast, and smote him from behind with his bronze-tipped spear between the shoulders, and drove it through his breast; and he fell with a thud, and struck the ground full with his forehead. [95] But Telemachus sprang back, leaving the long spear where it was, fixed in Amphinomus, for he greatly feared lest, as he sought to draw forth the long spear, one of the Achaeans might rush upon him and stab with his sword, or deal him a blow as he stooped over the corpse. So he started to run, and came quickly to his dear father, [100] and standing by his side spoke to him winged words: "Father, now will I bring thee a shield and two spears and a helmet all of bronze, well fitted to the temples, and when I come back I will arm myself, and will give armour likewise to the swineherd and yon neatherd; for it is better to be clothed in armour." [105] Then Odysseus of many wiles answered him and said: "Run, and bring them, while yet I have arrows to defend me, lest they thrust me from the door, alone as I am." So he spoke, and Telemachus hearkened to his dear father, and went his way to the store-chamber where the glorious arms were stored. [110] Thence he took four shields and eight spears and four helmets of bronze, with thick plumes of horse-hair; and he bore them forth, and quickly came to his dear father. Then first of all he himself girded the bronze about his body, and even in like manner the two slaves put on them the beautiful armour, [115] and took their stand on either side of Odysseus, the wise and crafty-minded. But he, so long as he had arrows to defend him, would ever aim, and smite the wooers one by one in his house, and they fell thick and fast.



Lesson Four:

- Imagine that you are either Odysseus, Telemachus or Penelope.
- Using as much detail from the text and your research as you can, write a speech or poem which describes your feelings at having your homeland invaded by the suitors, who took such terrible advantage of your hospitality.



Odyssey and Iliad in film and art:

- Homer's epic poems have continued to inspire people for generations. Here are just a few examples of the stories being portrayed in a variety of media.
- Why do you think the stories remain so important to Western peoples? What morals and lessons can you take from the stories we have just explored?

Lesson Five: The Moral of the Story

- Look back at the passages you have studied and the research you have done. What do you think are the morals of *Iliad* and *Odyssey*?
- Using the information have gathered, you are now going to create *A Visitor's Guide to Ancient Greece*. In this piece, you should include:
 - Details about the rules and expected behaviours of Ancient Greece
 - Information about the sorts of people, gods and creatures one might expect to meet
 - Descriptions of the landscape, cuisine and lifestyle
 - Illustrations and maps

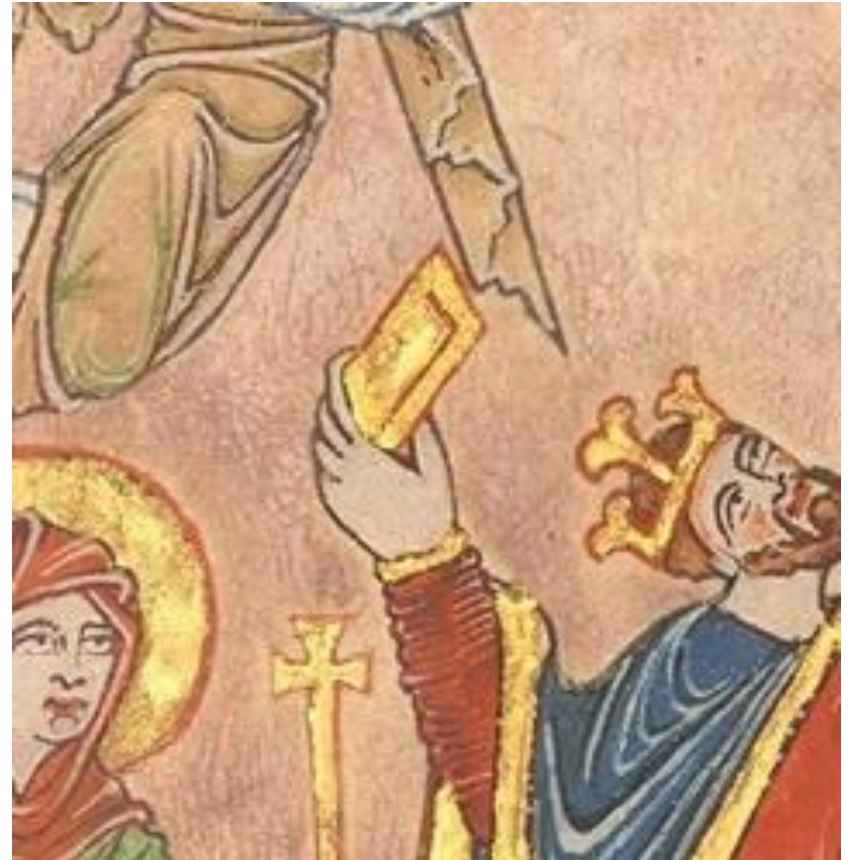
A dramatic painting depicting the hero Beowulf on the left, wearing chainmail and a red tunic, looking intently at the monstrous Grendel on the right. Grendel has a large, open mouth showing sharp teeth and a red tongue. The background is a fiery, chaotic scene with other figures in the distance. The title 'Beowulf' is written in a white, stylized font across the center, underlined.

Beowulf

The Anglo-Saxon Oral Tradition

Anglo-Saxon Poetry:

- *Beowulf* is an Anglo-Saxon poem, written in Old English.
- It was written in around 1,000 A.D. but was probably in existence for far longer, passed-on in the Oral Tradition (just like *Odyssey* and *Iliad*).
- It tells the story of the hero, Beowulf, and his battles against a monster named Grendel.
- It is the classic tale of the great warrior and his conquests – the triumph of Good over Evil.



The Poem in Action!

- Watch and listen to these renditions of the poem, which have been produced especially for Patriotic Alternative:
- <https://youtu.be/iK3JOh2KSKc>
- https://youtu.be/uJYFL7_DB8E

Beowulf – Your Tasks:

When you have watched and listened to the reproductions of Beowulf, complete the following tasks:

1. Research the story of Beowulf in full, using the internet and books.
2. Make a list of all of the characters whom you meet in the story.
3. Create a timeline which shows the main events of the story.
4. Now over to you! Imagine that you are a hero and that you are going to fight a monster, in an almighty battle of Good versus Evil. Using the traits of the Ballad Tradition which you have learned so far, write your own epic poem in which you describe your adventures!