

Hesiod: *Theogony* and *Works and Days*

A Study Guide

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Edition: Oxford World's Classics

Introduction

Hesiod, alongside Homer, stands at the dawn of Greek literature. His two major surviving works, *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, offer a profound window into the mythological, moral, and agrarian world of early Greece. Where *Theogony* explores the divine origins of the cosmos and gods, *Works and Days* shifts to earthly matters—justice, toil, and human ethics. Together, they form a dual lens: one cosmic, the other personal.

Part I: *Theogony* – The Birth of the Gods

Overview

Theogony (from *theos* meaning god and *gonē* meaning birth) is a mythopoetic cosmogony. Hesiod attempts to systematize the chaotic world of myth into a genealogy, giving structure to the origins of gods and the universe.

Key Themes

- **Chaos to Cosmos:** The narrative begins in *Chaos*—a void—and ends with the ordered rule of Zeus.
 - **Power Struggles:** The poem illustrates successive divine overthrows—Uranus by Cronus, Cronus by Zeus.
 - **Divine Justice:** Zeus emerges not only as powerful but as a figure of cosmic justice.
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Important Figures

- **Chaos** – The primordial void.
 - **Gaia (Earth)** – The fertile mother of all.
 - **Uranus (Sky)** – Gaia's son and consort; overthrown by Cronus.
 - **Cronus** – Titan who swallows his children to prevent being usurped.
 - **Zeus** – The triumphant Olympian who brings order.
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Notable Passages

“Verily at first Chaos came to be...”

This iconic line begins the poem, presenting Chaos not as disorder but as the raw potential of existence.

“For broad-browed Earth bare first of all like unto herself the starry Heaven...”

Gaia gives birth to Uranus, showing the self-generating force of Earth.

Structure

1. **Invocation to the Muses** – Hesiod's divine inspiration.
2. **The Primordial Gods** – Chaos, Gaia, Tartarus, Eros.
3. **Genealogy of the Titans and Olympians**

4. **Zeus's Rise and Rule**
 5. **Catalog of Goddesses** – Often interrupted and fragmentary but rich in names and roles.
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Part II: *Works and Days* – A Farmer's Wisdom

Overview

Works and Days is a didactic poem—part almanac, part moral instruction. Addressed to Hesiod's brother, Perses, it blends myth, practical advice, and ethical teachings.

Key Themes

- **Justice (Dike):** A central virtue, personified and praised.
 - **Labor and Toil (Ponoi):** Hesiod presents work as divinely ordained and necessary.
 - **Seasons and Timeliness:** A poetic farmer's calendar is interwoven with the moral message.
 - **Pandora and Decline:** Hesiod introduces a pessimistic myth of human decline through successive races of men.
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Important Myths and Lessons

- **Pandora** – The first woman, crafted by gods, brings a jar (not a box!) that releases evils into the world.
- **Five Races of Man:**
 - **Golden Age** – Peaceful and god-like.
 - **Silver Age** – Long childhood, disobedience.
 - **Bronze Age** – Violent and warlike.
 - **Heroic Age** – Noble, semi-divine.

- **Iron Age** – Hesiod’s time—marked by toil and injustice.

“For the gods keep hidden the means of livelihood...”

Hesiod explains the divine purpose of hardship—humans must work to survive.

Practical Advice

- Avoid the 13th of the month.
- Don’t plant at the solstice.
- Keep your tools in good condition.
- Work hard, but not too soon or too late.

This mixture of myth and agronomy creates a unique philosophical worldview: **struggle is divine**, and ethics are embedded in the rhythms of nature.

Structure

1. **Proem & Address to Perses**
 2. **Myths of Prometheus and Pandora**
 3. **Races of Man**
 4. **Praise of Justice**
 5. **Work Ethic & Agricultural Calendar**
 6. **Sailing Instructions and Days of Luck**
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Final Reflections

Hesiod’s works stand at the crossroads of myth, religion, ethics, and daily life. *Theogony* lifts the veil on the divine order of the cosmos, while *Works and Days* grounds the reader in the mortal struggle for justice and sustenance.

These are not mere stories—they are invitations to **understand the world**, to **respect the divine**, and to **live with wisdom**.

“The best treasure is a sparing tongue.” – Works and Days

Tags: Hesiod, Theogony, Works and Days, Greek Mythology, Ancient Greece, Study Guide, Classics, Philosophy, Oxford World's Classics