

Literary Analysis Workshop



Included in this workshop:
READING 2 Analyze genre in different cultural and historical contexts. **2C** Relate the characters, setting, and theme of a literary work to the historical, social, and economic ideas of its time. **3** Evaluate the changes in sound, form, figurative language, graphics, and dramatic structure in poetry across literary time periods.

The Epic

What do you do to celebrate the heroes of your day? Hold a parade? Have a party? Attend a banquet where speakers chronicle the hero's deeds? As far back as the third millennium B.C., heroes have been celebrated in a variety of ways. One type of celebration common to many cultures throughout history is to honor the hero's story in an epic.

The Epic Tradition

An **epic** is a long narrative poem that celebrates a hero's deeds. The earliest epic tales survived for centuries as oral traditions before they were finally written down. They came into existence as spoken words and were retold by poets from one generation to the next. Most orally composed epics date back to preliterate periods—before the cultures that produced them had developed written forms.



Detail of Bayeux Tapestry (11th century)

Since many epics were based on historical fact, their public performance provided both entertainment and education for the audience. The oral poets (known in different cultures as *scops* or *bards*) drew upon existing songs and legends, which they embellished or combined with original material. The poets had to be master improvisers, able to compose verse in their heads while simultaneously singing or chanting it. One characteristic feature of oral poetry is the repetition of certain words, phrases, or even lines. Two of the most notable examples of repeated elements are stock epithets and kennings.

- **Stock epithets** are adjectives that point out special traits of particular persons or things. In Homer, stock epithets are often compound adjectives, such as the “swift-footed” used to describe Achilles in the *Iliad* (page 78).
- **Kennings** are poetic synonyms found in Germanic poems, such as the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* (page 42). Rather than being an adjective, like an epithet, a kenning is a descriptive phrase or compound word that substitutes for a noun. For example, in *Beowulf* “the Almighty’s enemy” and “sin-stained demon” are two kennings that are used in place of Grendel’s name.

Stock epithets and kennings were building blocks that a poet could recite while mentally preparing for the next line or stanza. Epithets had an added advantage—they were designed to fit metrically into specific parts of the lines of verse. In skillful hands, these “formulas” helped to establish tone and reinforce character traits and setting.

Epic Proportions

Epics from different languages and time periods do not always have the same characteristics. Kennings, for example, are not found in Homer's epics. All epics, however, concern the actions of a **hero**, who can be described as

- being of noble birth or high position, and often of great historical or legendary importance
- exhibiting **character traits**, or qualities, that reflect important ideals of society
- performing courageous, sometimes superhuman, deeds that reflect the values of the era
- performing actions that often determine the fate of a nation or group of people

In addition, most epics share certain **conventions**, which reflect the larger-than-life events that a hero might experience.

- The **setting** is vast in scope, often involving more than one nation.
- The **plot** is complicated by supernatural beings or events and may involve a long and dangerous journey through foreign lands.
- **Dialogue** often includes long, formal speeches delivered by the major characters.
- The **theme** reflects timeless values, such as courage and honor, and encompasses universal ideas, such as good and evil or life and death.
- The **style** includes formal **diction** (the writer's choice of words and sentence structure) and a serious **tone** (the expression of the writer's attitude toward the subject).

A powerful monster, living down
In the darkness, growled in pain, impatient
As day after day the music rang
Loud in that hall, the harp's rejoicing
Call and the poet's clear songs, sung
Of the ancient beginnings of us all, recalling
The Almighty making the earth, shaping
These beautiful plains marked off by oceans,
Then proudly setting the sun and moon
To glow across the land and light it;

—*from Beowulf*

STRATEGIES FOR READING AN EPIC

When reading an epic, use the following strategies:

- Decide what virtues the hero embodies.
- Determine the hero's role in bringing about any changes in fortune for the characters, the nation, or the group of people depicted in the story.
- If a passage confuses you, go back and summarize the main idea of the passage.

Close Read

What characteristics of the epic do you recognize in this passage?