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.

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
The Anglo-Saxon Epic

from Beowulf
Epic Poem by the Beowulf Poet Translated by Burton Raffel

Meet the Author

The Beowulf Poet about 750

“Hear me!” So begins Beowulf, the oldest surviving epic poem in English. The command was intended to capture the listening audience’s attention, for Beowulf was originally chanted or sung aloud. Centuries of poet-singers, called scops (shōps), recited the adventures of Beowulf. It is our great fortune that eventually a gifted poet unified the heroic accounts and produced an enduring work of art.

By Anonymous Unfortunately, we don’t know who that poet was or when Beowulf was composed. Scholars contend that the poet may have lived anytime between the middle of the seventh century A.D. and the end of the tenth century. However, we do know where the poem was written. In the fifth century, bloody warfare in northern Europe had driven many Germanic-speaking tribes, including groups of Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, to abandon their homes. Many of these groups settled in England, where they established what is now called Anglo-Saxon civilization.

The people of the Anglo-Saxon period spoke a language known as Old English, the language in which Beowulf was composed.

Old English bears little resemblance to Modern English and so must be translated for readers today. By the time Beowulf was written, the Anglo-Saxons had also converted to Christianity. This Christian influence is evident in the poem.

Long Ago and Far Away Although Beowulf was composed in England, the poem describes events that take place in Scandinavia around the 500s among two groups: the Danes of what is now Denmark and the Geats (gēts) of what is now Sweden. Beowulf is a Geat warrior who crosses the sea to defeat Grendel, a monster who is terrorizing the Danes. He later returns to his homeland to succeed his uncle as king of the Geats.

Beowulf celebrates warrior culture and deeds requiring great strength and courage. Scops recited the poem and other tales in mead halls, large wooden buildings that provided a safe haven for warriors returning from battle. During the performances, audiences feasted and drank mead, an alcoholic beverage.

Survivor The sole surviving copy of Beowulf dates from about the year 1000. It is the work of Christian monks who preserved the literature of the past by copying manuscripts. After suffering mistreatment and several near-disasters, the Beowulf manuscript is now safely housed in the British Library in London.

Author Online

Go to thinkcentral.com, KEYWORD: HML12-4OB
TEXT ANALYSIS: CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EPIC

An epic, a long narrative poem that traces the adventures of a great hero, has the power to transport you to another time and place. Beowulf takes you to the Anglo-Saxon period and the land of the Danes and the Geats, where a mighty warrior battles fantastic monsters. As you read the poem, note some of the following characteristics of epic poetry:

- The hero is a legendary figure who performs deeds requiring incredible courage and strength.
- The hero embodies character traits that reflect lofty ideals.
- The poet uses formal diction and a serious tone.
- The poem reflects timeless values and universal themes.

READING STRATEGY: READING OLD ENGLISH POETRY

Old English poetry is marked by a strong rhythm that is easy to chant or sing. Here are some of the techniques used in an Old English poem:

- alliteration, or the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words, which helps unify the lines

  So mankind’s enemy continued his crimes

- caesura (sê-zhôr’ə), or a pause dividing each line, with each part having two accented syllables to help maintain the rhythm of the lines

  He took what he wanted, // all the treasures

- kenning, a metaphorical compound word or phrase substituted for a noun or name, which enhances meaning—for example, “mankind’s enemy” used in place of “Grendel”

As you read Beowulf, note examples of these techniques and consider their effect on rhythm and meaning in the poem.

VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

The words shown here help convey the monstrous forces Beowulf faces in the epic. Choose a word from the list that has the same definition as each numbered item.

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<tr>
<th>WORD LIST</th>
<th>affliction</th>
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1. claw 2. burden 3. notorious 4. cram

Complete the activities in your Reader/Writer Notebook.