

The Epic



stories from scratch, however; they drew on existing songs and legends, which they could embellish or combine with original material.

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.

Kennings are poetic synonyms found in Germanic poems, such as the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*. 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 turning his attention to 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 essentials of character and setting.

Characteristics of an Epic

Epics from different languages and time periods do not always have the same characteristics. Kennings, for example, are not found in Homer’s epics. However, the following characteristics are shared by most epics, whether they were composed orally or in

writing, in the Middle Ages or last year, in Old English or in Slovak:

- The hero, generally a male, is of noble birth or high position, and often of great historical or legendary importance.
- The hero’s character traits reflect important ideals of his society.
- The hero performs courageous—sometimes even superhuman—deeds that reflect the values of the era.
- The actions of the hero often determine the fate of a nation or group of people.
- The setting is vast in scope, often involving more than one nation.
- The poet uses formal diction and a serious tone.
- Major characters often deliver long, formal speeches.
- The plot is complicated by supernatural beings or events and may involve a long and dangerous journey through foreign lands.
- The poem reflects timeless values, such as courage and honor.
- The poem treats universal themes, such as good and evil or life and death.

Strategies for Reading: The Epic

1. Notice which characteristics of epics appear in the poem you are reading.
2. Decide what virtues the hero embodies.
3. Decide if the epic’s values are still held today.
4. Determine the hero’s role in bringing about any changes in fortune for the characters.
5. Use a list or diagram to keep track of the characters.
6. If a passage confuses you, go back and summarize the main idea of the passage.

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