



Included in this workshop:
READING 2B Analyze the influence of mythic and traditional literature on 20th and 21st century literature.
2C Relate the figurative language of a literary work to its historical and cultural setting.
(continued)

The Epic

Extraordinary heroes and hideous monsters. Brutal battles and dangerous voyages. Spectacular triumphs and crushing defeats. The epic tradition, still very much alive in today's movies and novels, began thousands of years ago with the orally told epic poem. In ancient Greece, listeners crowded around poet-storytellers to hear about the daring exploits of a hero named Odysseus. With its storm-tossed seas, powerful evildoers, and narrow escapes, it's no wonder that Homer's *Odyssey* remains one of the most famous epics in Western literature. It captivates us because it is a compelling narrative and a window into a time and place different from our own.

Part 1: Characteristics of the Epic

In literature, an **epic** is a long narrative poem. It recounts the adventures of an **epic hero**, a larger-than-life figure who undertakes great journeys and performs deeds requiring remarkable strength and cunning. As *you* journey through many episodes from the *Odyssey*, expect to encounter the following elements.

THE EPIC AT A GLANCE

EPIC HERO

- Possesses superhuman strength, craftiness, and confidence
- Is helped and harmed by interfering gods
- Embodies ideals and values that a culture considers admirable
- Emerges victorious from perilous situations



EPIC PLOT

Involves a long journey, full of complications, such as

- strange creatures
- large-scale events
- divine intervention
- treacherous weather



EPIC SETTING

- Includes fantastic or exotic lands
- Involves more than one nation



ARCHETYPES

All epics include **archetypes**—characters, situations, and images that are recognizable in many times and cultures:

- sea monster
- buried treasure
- epic hero
- wicked temptress
- suitors' contest
- loyal servant



EPIC THEMES

Reflect such universal concerns as

- courage
- a homecoming
- loyalty
- the fate of a nation
- beauty
- life and death



MODEL: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EPIC

Here, the Greek (Achaean) king Menelaus is speaking to his wife, Helen. He recalls the moment when he and Odysseus hid with their fellow soldiers inside a giant wooden horse, waiting to attack the Trojans. Formerly a Trojan herself, Helen stood outside the horse and called to the soldiers inside, mimicking the voices of their wives. As you read, notice the characteristics of an epic that are revealed.

from **BOOK 4: *The Red-Haired King and His Lady***

“In my life I have met, in many countries,
foresight and wit in many first rate men,
but never have I seen one like Odysseus
for steadiness and a stout heart. Here, for instance,
5 is what he did—had the **cold nerve** to do—
inside the hollow horse, where we were waiting,
picked men all of us, for the Trojan slaughter,
when all of a sudden, you came by—I dare say
drawn by some superhuman
10 power that planned an exploit for the Trojans;
and Deiphobus, that handsome man, came with you.
Three times you walked around it, patting it everywhere,
and called by name the flower of our fighters,
making your voice sound like their wives, calling.
15 Diomedes and I crouched in the center
along with Odysseus; we could hear you plainly;
and listening, we two were swept
by waves of longing—to reply, or go.
Odysseus fought us down, despite our craving,
20 and all the Achaeans kept their lips shut tight,
all but Anticlus. Desire moved his throat
to hail you, but Odysseus’ great hands clamped
over his jaws, and held. So he saved us all,
till Pallas Athena led you away at last.”



READING 3 Understand, make inferences and draw conclusions about the structure and elements of poetry and provide evidence from text to support understanding. Analyze the effects of diction and imagery in poetry. **5D** Demonstrate familiarity with works by authors from non-English-speaking literary traditions, with emphasis on classical literature.

Close Read

1. King Menelaus mentions several heroic traits that Odysseus exhibited while carrying out his plan to defeat the Trojans. One trait has been **boxed**. Identify two more.
2. What archetype does Helen represent? Explain your answer.
3. Reread lines 8–10 and 23–24. Explain how the gods interfered in the episode that Menelaus is describing.

Part 2: The Language of Homer

Because the language of Homer was ancient Greek, what you will read is an English translation. The *Odyssey* has been translated many times, and each translator has interpreted it differently. Read these two versions of the opening of Book 2. The first is written in verse and has a more formal **tone** and **diction**—closer to the original—while the second is written in prose and is less formal.

TRANSLATION 1

When primal Dawn spread on the eastern sky
her fingers of pink light, Odysseus' true son
stood up, drew on his tunic and his mantle,
slung on a sword-belt and a new-edged sword,
tied his smooth feet into good rawhide sandals,
and left his room, a god's brilliance upon him.

—translated by Robert Fitzgerald (1961)

TRANSLATION 2

Dawn came, showing her rosy fingers
through the early mists, and Telemachus
leapt out of bed. He dressed himself,
slung a sharp sword over his shoulder,
strapped a stout pair of boots on his lissom
feet, and came forth from his chamber
like a young god.

—translated by W. H. D. Rouse (1937)

The Greeks who first experienced the *Odyssey* did not read a written version; they heard it as a live performance. Singing or reciting, a poet kept the audience enthralled with **epic similes**, **epithets**, and **allusions**.

- A **simile** is a comparison between two unlike things, using the word *like* or *as*. Homer often develops a simile at great length, so that it goes on for several lines. This is known as an **epic simile**. In this passage from Book 20, an angry Odysseus is compared to a sausage being roasted over a fire.

His rage

held hard in leash, submitted to his mind,
while he himself rocked, rolling from side to side,
as a cook turns a sausage, big with blood
and fat, at a scorching blaze, without a pause,
to broil it quick; so he rolled left and right, . . .

- An **epithet** is a brief descriptive phrase used to characterize a particular person or thing. When a poet needed to fill out a line, he'd add an epithet with the right meter and number of syllables. Odysseus is known by various epithets, including “son of Laertes” and “raider of cities.”
- An **allusion** is a reference to a famous person, place, or event. To help his audience picture what he described, a poet might have made an allusion to something they already knew. For instance, when Odysseus' son first sees the palace of Menelaus, he says, “This is the way the court of Zeus must be.” Every Greek would have understood this allusion to the ruler of the gods.

MODEL 1: EPIC SIMILE

In this excerpt, Odysseus is watching the performance of a bard (a poet like Homer himself). Suddenly he finds himself listening to the story of the fall of Troy and of his own part in it. Notice the epic simile that is developed over this entire passage.

from **BOOK 8: *The Songs of the Harper***

And Odysseus
let the bright molten tears run down his cheeks,
weeping [like] the way a wife mourns for her lord
on the lost field where he has gone down fighting
5 the day of wrath that came upon his children.
At sight of the man panting and dying there,
she slips down to enfold him, crying out;
then feels the spears, prodding her back and shoulders,
and goes bound into slavery and grief.
10 Piteous weeping wears away her cheeks:
but no more piteous than Odysseus' tears,
cloaked as they were, now, from the company.

Close Read

1. What two things are being compared in this epic simile?
2. In the **boxed** lines, the wife cries first for her dying husband, then for herself. Consider what this might suggest about Odysseus' feelings. What might the epic hero be crying about?

MODEL 2: EPITHET

Here, the goddess Athena speaks to her father, Zeus, on behalf of Odysseus. Reminding Zeus of sacrifices made to him during the Trojan War, she begs him to let Odysseus return home. Athena has told Zeus that Odysseus is so homesick that he "longs to die."

from **BOOK 1: *A Goddess Intervenes***

"Are you not moved by this, **boxed** Lord of Olympus?
Had you no pleasure from Odysseus' offerings
beside the Argive ships, on Troy's wide seaboard?
O Zeus, what do you hold against him now?"
5 To this the summoner of cloud replied:
"My child, what strange remarks you let escape you.
Could I forget that kingly man, Odysseus?
There is no mortal half so wise; no mortal
gave so much to the lords of open sky."

Close Read

1. One epithet of Zeus is **boxed**. Find another.
2. What epithet does Zeus use to refer to Odysseus?

Part 3: Reading the Epic

Reading the *Odyssey* is a complex experience. On one level, the poem is an action-packed narrative that makes readers eagerly anticipate the hero's homecoming. On another level, it's a work of art to be appreciated and analyzed. Use the following strategies to help you make the most of your journey through the epic.

READING THE EPIC AS NARRATIVE

- Note the changing narrators. Who is telling the story at any given point? Consider how the different narrators deepen your understanding of characters and events.
- **Visualize** the action and the settings by using details in the text.
- Track the events and conflicts and try to **predict** the outcomes.
- Use a chart like the one shown to keep track of the characters, including gods and goddesses and Odysseus' friends and foes. What does each do to either help or harm him?

READING THE EPIC AS POETRY

- Try reading the lines aloud, as the epic was originally performed.
- Read the lines for their sense, just as you would read prose. Follow the punctuation, and remember that the end of a line does not always mean the end of a thought.
- Listen for sound devices such as **alliteration**, **assonance**, **consonance**, and **rhyme** and notice how they reinforce meaning. (Although the sound devices in English aren't the same as those in the original Greek, they do reflect the translator's attempt to capture the spirit and technique of Homer's verse.)
- Consider how the **imagery** and **figurative language**—especially the **epic similes**—help you understand characters and events.

READING THE EPIC AS A REFLECTION OF ITS TIME

- Pay attention to the **character traits** of Odysseus, the epic hero, by looking closely at how he behaves and how he is described. What do these traits tell you about the values of the time?
- Think about what you've learned of Greek history. What events may have influenced Homer?
- Remember that in Homer's time most Greeks believed that the gods took an active interest in human affairs and themselves behaved much like humans. How are these religious beliefs apparent in the epic?

STRATEGIES IN ACTION

Characters Who Help Odysseus	Characters Who Harm Odysseus
Athena (goddess) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• pleads with Zeus to help Odysseus escape Calypso's island	Poseidon (god) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• stirs up nasty weather to create problems for Odysseus

from **BOOK 4: *The Red-Haired King and His Lady***

but never have I seen one like Odysseus for steadiness and a stout heart. . . .

Alliteration: The repeated "s" sound emphasizes the strength of the epic hero.

Odysseus' Traits	Evidence
strong, skilled, and swift	frequently referred to as "master mariner and soldier"
quick-witted; thinks on his feet	described as "strategist" when he responds to a difficult question posed by Calypso (Book 5)

MODEL: READING THE EPIC

Odysseus has been gone from his homeland for years, and all except his family believe him dead. Young men make themselves at home in Odysseus' castle while vying to marry his "widow," Penelope. Odysseus' son, Telemachus, calls an assembly to discuss the situation. The following excerpt is an exchange between Telemachus and one of Penelope's suitors.

from **BOOK 2: A Hero's Son Awakens**

Telemachus addresses the crowd, complaining of the suitors' behavior.

- "No; these men spend their days around our house killing our beeves and sheep and fatted goats, carousing, soaking up our good dark wine, not caring what they do. They squander everything.
- 5 We have no strong Odysseus to defend us, and as to putting up a fight ourselves—we'd only show our incompetence in arms. Expel them, yes, if I only had the power; the whole thing's out of hand, insufferable."

A suitor responds to Telemachus' heated accusation.

- 10 "You want to shame us, and humiliate us, but you should know the suitors are not to blame—it is your own dear, incomparably cunning mother. For three years now—and it will soon be four—she has been breaking the hearts of the Achaeans,
- 15 holding out hope to all, and sending promises to each man privately—but thinking otherwise.

- Here is an instance of her trickery:
she had her great loom standing in the hall and the fine warp of some vast fabric on it;
- 20 we were attending her, and she said to us: 'Young men, my suitors, now my lord is dead, let me finish my weaving before I marry, or else my thread will have been spun in vain. It is a shroud I weave for Lord Laertes,
- 25 when cold death comes to lay him on his bier. The country wives would hold me in dishonor if he, with all his fortune, lay unshrouded.' We have men's hearts; she touched them; we agreed. So every day she wove on the great loom—
- 30 but every night by torchlight she unwove it; and so for three years she deceived the Achaeans."

Close Read

1. Try to visualize the suitors at Odysseus' home by using details in lines 1–9. Describe the image that the lines conjured up in your mind.
2. Note the two speakers. What does Telemachus accuse the suitors of doing? How does one suitor defend his and the other suitors' actions?
3. Identify two examples of sound devices in the boxed text.
4. What do the accusations made in this excerpt tell you about Greek values?
5. How would you describe Penelope? Cite details that help you to understand the traits Greeks prized in a woman.

Part 4: Analyze the Literature

Here, Odysseus returns to his homeland at last, disguised as an old beggar. The first person he approaches is Eumaeus, his head swineherd. Welcoming the unknown beggar in the name of his missing lord, Eumaeus gives him a hot meal, a drink, and a place to sleep. To test the faithful swineherd and to try to keep warm in the frigid cold, the disguised Odysseus devises a story. Through the story, he hopes to encourage Eumaeus to give him—a supposed stranger—the cloak off his back. As you read this excerpt, use what you've learned to make sense of the episode.

from **BOOK 14: Hospitality in the Forest**

“Listen,” he said,

“Eumaeus, and you others, here’s a wishful
tale that I shall tell. The wine’s behind it,
vaporing wine, that makes a serious man
5 break down and sing, kick up his heels and clown,
or tell some story that were best untold.
But now I’m launched, I can’t stop now.

Would god I felt

the hot blood in me that I had at Troy!
Laying an ambush near the walls one time,
10 Odysseus and Menelaus were commanders
and I ranked third. I went at their request.
We worked in toward the bluffs and battlements
and, circling the town, got into canebrakes,
thick and high, a marsh where we took cover,
15 hunched under arms.

The northwind dropped, and night
came black and wintry. A fine sleet descending
whitened the cane like hoarfrost, and clear ice
grew dense upon our shields. The other men,
all wrapt in blanket cloaks as well as tunics,
20 rested well, in shields up to their shoulders,
but I had left my cloak with friends in camp,
foolhardy as I was. No chance of freezing hard,
I thought, so I wore kilts and a shield only.
But in the small hours of the third watch, when stars
25 that rise at evening go down to their setting,
I nudged Odysseus, who lay close beside me;
he was alert then, listening, and I said:

‘Son of Laertes and the gods of old,
Odysseus, master mariner and soldier,
30 I cannot hold on long among the living.

Close Read

1. Think about why Odysseus is telling Eumaeus this elaborate story. Through his plan of action, what traits does he display? Explain.
2. Reread the boxed text and visualize the imagery used to describe the setting. What does the imagery serve to emphasize?
3. What epithets does the soldier use to address Odysseus in the story?

The cold is making a corpse of me. Some god
 inveigled me to come without a cloak.
 No help for it now; too late.’

Next thing I knew

he had a scheme all ready in his mind—
 35 and what a man he was for schemes and battles!
 Speaking under his breath to me, he murmured:
 ‘Quiet; none of the rest should hear you.’

Then,

propping his head on his forearm, he said:
 ‘Listen, lads, I had an ominous dream,
 40 the point being how far forward from our ships
 and lines we’ve come. Someone should volunteer
 to tell the corps commander, Agamemnon;
 he may reinforce us from the base.’

At this,

Thoas jumped up, the young son of Andraemon,
 45 put down his crimson cloak and headed off,
 running shoreward.

Wrapped in that man’s cloak

how gratefully I lay in the bitter dark
 until the dawn came stitched in gold! I wish
 I had that sap and fiber in me now!”

50 Then—O my swineherd!—you replied, Eumaeus:

“That was a fine story, and well told,
 not a word out of place, not a pointless word.
 No, you’ll not sleep cold for lack of cover,
 or any other comfort one should give
 55 to a needy guest. However, in the morning,
 you must go flapping in the same old clothes.
 Shirts and cloaks are few here; every man
 has one change only. When our prince arrives,
 the son of Odysseus, he will make you gifts—
 60 cloak, tunic, everything—and grant you passage
 wherever you care to go.”

On this he rose

and placed the bed of balsam near the fire,
 strewing sheepskins on top, and skins of goats.
 Odysseus lay down. His host threw over him
 65 a heavy blanket cloak, his own reserve
 against the winter wind when it came wild.

Close Read

4. What quality does Odysseus attribute to himself in telling this tale? Cite specific details to support your answer.
5. Reread lines 31–33 and 39–46. What do you learn about how the ancient Greeks perceived their gods and ominous dreams?
6. Think about where else you have encountered a character like Eumaeus. What archetype does he represent? Explain.