

# Rutgers Learning Centers

At Camden Campus

## READING: THE EPIC

**Epic** - long narrative poem that relates a hero's adventures in episodes

**Episodes** - formed into a sequential story that tells the history of a nation or culture

**Epic Formula** - a system the poet followed to recall the order and content of the episodes, includes conventions

The following are conventions - characteristics of the epic's structure, style and subject. As you read the episodes, you will see them as memory helpers used in an oral poetic tradition.

**Theme** - a complete statement, usually in the introduction, that summarizes the subject matter and action that will be recited by the poet.

**Hero** - a figure of great stature, who usually has historical, national or legendary significance. The hero exhibits great valor and undertakes glorious deeds that nobody else can or will do.

**Question** - Usually appears near the beginning of the poem and is addressed to a Muse (a goddess-type figure called on for inspiration and guidance.) The narrative that follows, then, is the answer.

**Setting** - is vast and can cover a country, a region, the world, or the universe, or long periods of time.

**Similes** - elaborate and extended comparisons that are not always introduced by "like" or "as." They glorify or reduce the dignity of things to which they are being compared.

**Style** - the poet recounts the hero's deeds throughout the episodes in an objective manner.

**Tone** - will either be of great simplicity or grand elevation reflecting normal human qualities or superhuman actions.

The following conventions may help you to further refine your reading of an epic.

**Invocation of a muse** - the poet calls on a goddess-type figure for inspiration and guidance.

**In medias res** - means in the middle of things. The poet begins the narrative where the action is already taking place and then fills in needed historical information.

Descent into **Hell** - **hero** descends into Hell where he converses with the dead.

**Extended formal speeches** - used by the poet to give the history of the characters and setting. Used by the characters to boast about past accomplishments.

**Supernatural forces** - the gods become involved in human doings, interfering in the action, taking sides, or taking charge when problems can't be resolved. This taking charge is called "Deus ex machina," meaning "god by machine."

Remember: any or all of these conventions may be used in the epic. Different poets use different combinations of these devices in their epic formulae.

For more information, visit or call your nearest Rutgers Learning Center, or visit our website:<http://rlc.rutgers.edu>

Camden  
Armitage 231  
856/225-6442

College Ave  
Kreeger LRC  
732/932-1443

Cook/Douglass  
Loree 124  
732/932-1660

Livingston  
Tillett 111  
732/445-0986

Newark  
Conklin 126  
973/353-5608