

## Before You Read

## The Epic and the Poem

### from *Beowulf* and *Casey at the Bat*

#### Make the Connection

##### Quickwrite

The old epic heroes were larger-than-life warriors. They were usually the saviors of their people. What do our sports heroes today have in common with those epic heroes? How are they different? Jot down your ideas.

#### Literary Focus

##### Epic

An **epic** is a long narrative poem written in formal, elegant language that tells about a series of quests undertaken by a great hero. In the ancient epics this hero is a warrior who embodies the values cherished by the culture that recites the epic.

The oldest stories in the world are epics. In ancient Mesopotamia around 2000 B.C., people told the epic of the hero Gilgamesh, who was searching for the secret of immortal life. In ancient Greece around 500 B.C., children learned values by studying the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Homer's great epics about the Trojan War heroes. In India, children know the adventures of the heroes in the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. In Anglo-Saxon England around A.D. 700, people passed the long, dark nights listening to bards tell the story of the hero Beowulf, who saved a kingdom from two swamp monsters.



Sutton Hoo helmet (7th century) from the Sutton Hoo ship treasure, Suffolk, England.

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#### A mock-heroic story. "Casey at the Bat"

is a short narrative poem that imitates the old epic tales, but in a comical way. Instead of a warrior we have a small-town baseball player. Instead of a quest focused on saving a great kingdom, we have a quest for a home run to save Mudville's home team. Instead of the epic poet's elegant similes, metaphors, and alliteration, we have sports slang.

#### SKILLS FOCUS

##### Literary Skills

Understand the characteristics of epics and the mock-heroic narrative.

## The Sirens

*Odysseus returns to Circe's island. The goddess reveals his course to him and gives advice on how to avoid the dangers he will face: the Sirens, who lure sailors to their destruction; the Wandering Rocks, sea rocks that destroy even birds in flight; the perils of the sea monster Scylla and, nearby, the whirlpool Charybdis; and the cattle of the sun god, which Tiresias has warned Odysseus not to harm.*

As Circe spoke, Dawn mounted her golden throne,  
and on the first rays Circe left me, taking  
her way like a great goddess up the island.

575 I made straight for the ship, roused up the men  
to get aboard and cast off at the stern.

They scrambled to their places by the rowlocks  
and all in line dipped oars in the gray sea.

680 But soon an offshore breeze blew to our liking—  
a canvas-bellying breeze, a lusty shipmate

sent by the singing nymph with sunbright hair.  
So we made fast the braces, and we rested,

letting the wind and steersman work the ship.  
The crew being now silent before me, I

685 addressed them, sore at heart:

'Dear friends,  
more than one man, or two, should know those  
things

690 Circe foresaw for us and shared with me,  
so let me tell her forecast: then we die  
with our eyes open, if we are going to die,  
or know what death we baffle if we can. Sirens  
weaving a haunting song over the sea  
we are to shun, she said, and their green shore  
all sweet with clover; yet she urged that I

695 you are to tie me up, tight as a splint,  
erect along the mast, lashed to the mast,  
and if I shout and beg to be untied,  
take more turns of the rope to muffle me.'

700 I rather dwelt on this part of the forecast,  
while our good ship made time, bound outward  
down

the wind for the strange island of Sirens.  
Then all at once the wind fell, and a calm

came over all the sea, as though some power  
lulled the swell.

705                   The crew were on their feet  
briskly, to furl the sail, and stow it; then  
each in place, they poised the smooth oar blades  
and sent the white foam scudding by. I carved  
a massive cake of beeswax into bits  
710 and rolled them in my hands until they softened—  
no long task, for a burning heat came down  
from Helios, lord of high noon. Going forward  
I carried wax along the line, and laid it  
thick on their ears. They tied me up, then, plumb  
715 amidships, back to the mast, lashed to the mast,  
and took themselves again to rowing. Soon,  
as we came smartly within hailing distance,  
the two Sirens, noting our fast ship  
off their point, made ready, and they sang:

720                   This way, oh turn your bows,  
                  Achaea's glory,  
As all the world allows—  
                  Moor and be merry.

725                   Sweet coupled airs we sing.  
                  No lonely seafarer  
Holds clear of entering  
                  Our green mirror.

730                   Pleased by each purling note  
                  Like honey twining  
From her throat and my throat,  
                  Who lies a-pining?

735                   Sea rovers here take joy  
                  Voyaging onward,  
As from our song of Troy  
Graybeard and rower-boy  
                  Goeth more learned.

                  All feats on that great field  
                  In the long warfare,  
Dark days the bright gods willed,  
                  Wounds you bore there,

740

*Argos' old soldiery<sup>44</sup>  
On Troy beach teeming,  
Charmed out of time we see.  
No life on earth can be  
Hid from our dreaming.*

**44. Argos' old soldiery:**  
Soldiers from Argos, a city  
in ancient Greece..

745 The lovely voices in ardor appealing over the water  
made me crave to listen, and I tried to say  
'Untie me!' to the crew, jerking my brows;  
but they bent steady to the oars. Then Perimedes  
got to his feet, he and Eurylochus,  
750 and passed more line about, to hold me still.  
So all rowed on, until the Sirens  
dropped under the sea rim, and their singing  
dwindled away.

My faithful company

755 rested on their oars now, peeling off  
the wax that I had laid thick on their ears;  
then set me free.

## THINKING ABOUT THE SELECTION

### Recalling

1. What does Odysseus have his crew do to him so that he can listen to the Sirens' song?
2. What does Odysseus do to protect his men?
3. How does he react to the song?

### Interpreting

4. Summarize what the Sirens say in the song.
5. Compare and contrast the peril of the Sirens and the peril of the Lotus-Eaters.

### Applying

6. Why do you think Homer decided to let only Odysseus hear the Sirens' song?