

Epic

(Simplified from *A Glossary of Literary Terms*)

The basic definition

An epic is a long poem, written in a formal and elevated (grand) style, about a hero whose actions matter enormously, not just to the hero personally, but to an entire nation, or even to all of humanity.

Two types of epic

Traditional (or "folk") epics began as stories that were spoken aloud and passed down through generations, long before they were ever written down. Eventually, someone wrote them down in the form we know today. Examples include Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (ancient Greece) and the Old English poem *Beowulf*.

Literary epics are different. These are written deliberately, from the start, by a single poet who was consciously imitating the older, traditional epic style. Examples include Virgil's *Aeneid* (Latin, imitating Homer) and Milton's *Paradise Lost* (English, imitating Virgil).

Notice the chain here: Homer influenced Virgil, and Virgil influenced Milton. This is a good example of how literary traditions build on each other across centuries and languages.

Aristotle ranked epic as the second-greatest literary genre, right after tragedy. Writing a truly great epic requires an enormous range of skill from a poet: deep knowledge, powerful imagination, and total control over a huge, complicated structure. Because of this difficulty, in roughly 3,000 years of literary history, across many different languages, only a small handful of poems are widely agreed to be genuinely great epics. This should give you a sense of just how ambitious this genre is.

The five common features of a literary epic

I. A hero of huge importance. Not just important to himself, but to an entire people, nation, or even all of humanity. *Achilles*, in the *Iliad*, is the son of a sea-goddess. *Aeneas*, in the *Aeneid*, is the son of the goddess Aphrodite. In *Paradise Lost*, *Adam* and *Eve* are literally the ancestors of the entire human race.

II. A vast setting. The action might span the entire known world, or even more. *Odysseus* travels across the whole Mediterranean Sea on his way home from war. *Paradise Lost* is even bigger in scope, it takes place across heaven, earth, and hell, and even in the empty space between them.

III. Extraordinary actions. This usually means either massive battles, or an incredibly difficult and dangerous journey. In *Paradise Lost*, this includes a full-scale war in heaven between God's angels and the rebel angels led by Satan.

IV. Gods or supernatural beings actively participate. In Homer, the Greek gods take sides and intervene directly in human events. In *Paradise Lost*, God, Christ, and angels are all active characters. In the 1700s, critics had a specific term for this: they called these divine or supernatural participants "the machinery" of the epic.

V. A grand, formal writing style. Epic poetry doesn't sound like everyday speech, it's deliberately elevated, using formal language, complicated sentence structures, and a ceremonial tone that matches the seriousness of the subject.

Common techniques and structures you'll see in epics

I. Invoking a muse: Epic poems traditionally begin with the poet calling on a "muse" (a goddess of inspiration) to help them tell the story properly. This is often followed by a direct question to the muse, whose "answer" launches the actual story.

II. Starting in *medias res* (Latin for "in the middle of things"): Instead of starting at the very beginning of the story chronologically, epics often begin partway through the action, with earlier events explained later through flashback or storytelling. *Paradise Lost*, for example, opens with the rebel angels already defeated and thrown into hell. We only learn how they got there in later books, when the angel Raphael tells Adam the backstory.

III. Long, formal lists of characters: Epics often pause to introduce many characters formally, sometimes giving each one a speech that reveals their personality, like a grand roll call before a battle.

A more informal use of the word "epic"

Sometimes people use "epic" more loosely, to describe any work that has a similarly huge scope and ambition, even if it's a prose novel, not a poem, and doesn't follow all five features listed above. Under this looser meaning, people sometimes call these "epics": Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (which is especially clever, because it takes just one single ordinary day in Dublin and structures it to loosely echo Homer's *Odyssey*). One Marxist critic, Georg Lukács, went even further and called the novel in general "the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God", meaning that in a world without shared religious certainty, the novel became our new way of telling big, meaningful stories about human life.