

EPIC

Introduction

The *epic* is the oldest and one of the grandest forms of literature. Before novels, before modern drama, and before lyric poetry became dominant, civilizations preserved their history, beliefs, values, and heroic ideals through epic poems. Ancient societies did not simply read epics for entertainment. They regarded them as records of their cultural identity. An epic celebrated the courage of heroes, the power of gods, and the destiny of entire nations. Among the world's greatest literary masterpieces are epics such as: Homer's *Iliad*, Homer's *Odyssey*, and Virgil's *Aeneid*.

An epic is a long narrative poem, on a serious subject, told in an elevated style, and centred on a heroic or quasi-divine figure whose actions determine the fate of a tribe, nation, or even the whole human race.

Essential Characteristics of an Epic

Most epics share the following defining features:

A. An epic is much longer than ordinary poems. Its length allows the poet to develop numerous episodes, characters, speeches, and descriptions.

B. Epic never deals with trivial incidents. Its subjects include war, religion, national destiny, creation, and heroic journeys.

C. The protagonist is usually a king, a warrior, a prince, a founder of a nation, or a semi-divine figure. The hero represents the ideals of a culture.

D. The hero's actions influence an entire nation, a civilization, or humanity itself. *Achilles* (*Iliad*) fights for the Greeks. *Aeneas* (*Aeneid*) founded the Roman nation. *Adam* and *Eve* (*Paradise Lost*) represent all humankind.

E. Epic language is formal, dignified, majestic, and rhetorical. The poet avoids ordinary conversation and adopts a style suitable to heroic events.

F. Presence of supernatural elements like Gods, angels, demons, fate, prophecy, or other supernatural beings often intervene in human affairs. Examples include the Greek gods in the *Iliad*, and God and Satan in *Paradise Lost*.

Types of Epic

Critics distinguish between two principal kinds of epic, primary and secondary.

I. Primary (Traditional or Folk) Epic

A primary epic develops gradually through oral tradition before being written down. Characteristics include: anonymous origin, oral composition, collective authorship, repeated formulas, and performance by singers or bards.

Examples: Homer's *Iliad*, Homer's *Odyssey*, The Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*

Although Homer is traditionally named as the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, these poems preserve many features of earlier oral composition.

II. Secondary (Literary or Art) Epic

A literary epic is consciously written by an individual poet who deliberately imitates the traditional epic form. Characteristics include: single known author, carefully planned structure, sophisticated literary style, conscious artistic design.

Examples: Virgil's *Aeneid*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*

These poets inherited epic conventions and reshaped them for new historical and religious purposes.

Epic Conventions

Epics follow certain conventions that traditionally characterize epic poetry.

A. Invocation to the Muse: The poet begins by asking for divine inspiration. The invocation suggests that epic poetry concerns truths beyond ordinary human knowledge.

B. Statement of Theme: Early in the poem, the poet announces the central subject. This prepares readers for the grand narrative that follows.

C. In Medias Res: Epic poems typically begin with three main traditional techniques: a statement of the theme, an invocation of the muse, and starting in medias res, medias res being a characteristic feature of Homeric epics. Rather than beginning at the chronological beginning, epic poems often open during the middle of the action. Earlier events are narrated later through flashbacks, speeches, or recollections.

D. Epic Hero: The hero possesses extraordinary qualities. Typical characteristics include courage, honour, strength, leadership, and endurance. Yet epic heroes also possess flaws. Examples include *Achilles'* anger, *Odysseus'* pride, and *Aeneas'* inner conflicts.

E. Epic Simile (Homeric Simile): One of the most distinctive epic conventions. An epic simile is an unusually long and elaborate comparison. Unlike ordinary similes, epic similes develop into miniature scenes.

Example: A warrior may be compared to a lion, an eagle, a storm or a forest fire. The comparison continues for many lines before returning to the main narrative. Milton also employs magnificent epic similes throughout *Paradise Lost*.

F. Epic Catalogues: Epics often include long lists and elaborate descriptions of armies, ships, warriors, kings, or genealogies. The famous catalogue of ships in the *Iliad* is one of the best-known examples. These catalogues emphasize the vast scale of the epic world.

G. Formal Speeches: Epic characters frequently deliver long, dignified speeches. These speeches reveal character, political ideals, or moral principles.

H. Epic Battles: The battle scenes are detailed and highly dramatic. They often include single combat, military strategy, heroic deaths, and divine intervention.

The Epic Style

The style of epic poetry is elevated and ceremonial. Typical features include formal diction, long periodic sentences, grand descriptions, rhetorical speeches and dignified tone. The style reflects the greatness of the subject.

The Purpose of Epic

Epic serves several purposes.

- I. The epic records important historical or legendary events.
- II. It presents ideals of courage and honour.
- III. It teaches moral values. Heroes become examples for later generations.
- IV. Explain cultural origins. Many epics describe the founding of nations, religious history, or the origins of civilization.

Mock Epic (Mock-Heroic)

The mock epic, a satirical form that imitates epic conventions while treating a trivial subject. Instead of heroic wars, the mock epic describes social quarrels, fashionable society, or minor incidents. The humour arises from the contrast between grand style and insignificant subject matter.

Example: Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*. A stolen lock of hair is described as though it were an event of world-historical importance.

Mock epics parody traditional epic conventions such as invocations, supernatural machinery, epic battles, and heroic speeches.

Epic and Other Genres

<u>Genre</u>	<u>Difference from Epic</u>
Lyric	Expresses personal emotion rather than extended heroic narrative
Novel	Usually written in prose and focuses more on individual or social life
Tragedy	Concentrates on one crisis rather than a vast national history
Romance	Often emphasizes adventure and marvel rather than national destiny

Influence of the Epic

The epic has profoundly influenced later literature. Epic conventions appear in novels, films, fantasy literature, and science fiction. Modern works often adapt epic structures while changing their settings. Examples include large-scale fantasy narratives and national historical novels.