

## EPIC:

A long narrative POEM in elevated STYLE, presenting characters of high position in a series of adventures which form an organic whole through their relation to a central figure of heroic proportions and through their development of EPISODES important to the history of a nation or race.

The origin of epics is a matter of great scholarly dispute. According to one theory, the first epics took shape from the scattered work of various unknown poets, and through accretion these early EPISODES were gradually molded into a unified whole and an ordered sequence.

Though held vigorously by some, this theory has generally given place to one which holds that the materials of the epic may have accumulated in this fashion but that the epic poem itself is the product of a single genius who gives it STRUCTURE and expression. Epics without certain authorship are called FOLK EPICS, whether the scholar believes in a folk or a single authorship theory of origins, however.

Epics, both FOLK and ART EPICS, share a group of common characteristics:

1. the HERO is a figure of imposing stature, of national or international importance, and of great historical or legendary significance;
2. the SETTING is vast in scope, covering great nations, the world, or the universe; the action consists of deeds of great valor or requiring superhuman courage;
3. supernatural forces—gods, angels, and demons—interest themselves in the action and intervene from time to time;
4. a STYLE of sustained elevation and grand simplicity is used; and
5. the epic poet recounts the deeds of his heroes with objectivity.

To these general characteristics (some of which are omitted from particular epics), should be added a list of common devices or CONVENTIONS employed by most epic poets:

- a. the poet opens by stating the theme,
- b. calls on a Muse to inspire and instruct the poet,
- c. and opens the narrative *in medias res*—in the middle of things—giving the necessary exposition in later portions of the epic;
- d. the poet includes CATALOGS of warriors, ships, armies;
- e. the poet gives extended formal speeches by the main characters;
- f. the poet makes frequent use of the EPIC SIMILE.

A few of the more important FOLK Epics are:

the Greek Iliad and Odyssey  
the Old English Beowulf,  
the East Indian Mahabharata,  
the Spanish Cid,  
the Finnish Kalevala,  
the French Song of Roland,  
and the German Nibelungenlied.

Some of the best known ART Epics are:

Virgil's Aeneid,  
Dante's Divine Comedy,  
Tasso's Jerusalem Delivered,  
Milton's Paradise Lost.

American poets in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries struggled to produce a good epic poem on the American adventure, but without success. Longfellow's *Hiawatha* is an attempt at an Indian epic. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, considered as the autobiography of a generic American, is sometimes called an American epic, as are Stephen Vincent Benét's *John Brown's Body*, Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, and Hart Crane's *The Bridge*.

In the Middle Ages there was a great mass of literature verging on the epic in form and purpose though not answering strictly to the conventional epic formula. These poems are variously referred to as epic and as ROMANCE. Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* is the supreme example.

## EPIC FORMULA

The CONVENTIONS Of STRUCTURE employed by most Epic poets, such as the statement Of THEME, the INVOCATION to the Muse, beginning in medias res, CATALOGS of warriors, extended formal speeches, and similar structural devices.

## EPIC SIMILE

An elaborated comparison, the epic simile differs from an ordinary SIMILE in being more involved, more ornate, and a conscious imitation of the Homeric manner. The secondary object or VEHICLE is developed into an independent aesthetic object, an IMAGE which for the moment excludes the primary object or TENOR with which it is compared.

The following epic simile is from Homer's *Iliad*: