

Definitions of “Epic”

To be **epic**, a poem must be on a large scale, narrative in nature (told in the 3rd person), dealing with great and noble subjects (heroes and gods, battles, legendary people and events). If the word "epic" immediately conjures up the images of lurid "true-life" Sunday night network mini-series or movies, you will need to find another adjective to describe such worthy television fare. Both epics are, in fact, massive poems. Both use a standard (in the Classical world, at least) epic meter, the dactylic hexameter, which, while extremely restrictive, still allows for remarkable diversity when used by a brilliant poet like Homer. There is no rhyme. All manner of poetic devices (e.g. simile, metaphor, alliteration) can be found here.

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Epic, long narrative poem, majestic both in theme and style. Epics deal with legendary or historical events of national or universal significance, involving action of broad sweep and grandeur. Typically, an epic includes several features: the introduction of supernatural forces that shape the action; conflict in the form of combat; and stylistic conventions such as an invocation to the Muse, a formal statement of the theme, long lists of the protagonists involved, and set speeches couched in elevated language.

Epic poems express the nature or ideals of an entire nation at a significant or crucial period of its history. The characteristics of the hero of an epic are national rather than individual, and the exercise of those traits in heroic deeds serves to gratify a sense of national pride. At other times epics may synthesize the ideals of a great religious or cultural movement. *The Divine Comedy* (1307-1321) by Italian poet Dante Alighieri expresses the faith of medieval Christianity. *The Faerie Queene* (1590-1609) by English poet Edmund Spenser represents the spirit of the Renaissance in England; like *Paradise Lost* (1667) by English poet John Milton, it represents the ideals of Christian humanism.

Epic verse may be classified either as folk or as literary epic. Folk epics are believed to have developed from the orally transmitted folk poetry of tribal bards or other authors. Well-known examples of the folk epic are the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* (8th century) and the Indian epics the *Mahabharata* (300 BC-AD 300) and the *Ramayana* (3rd century BC).

Literary epics are the creation of known poets who consciously employ a long-established form. Like folk epics, literary epics deal with the traditions, mythical or historical, of a nation. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are regarded as Greek literary epics. In Rome, national epic poetry reached its highest achievement in the 1st century BC in the *Aeneid* by the poet Virgil. In Persia the poet Firdawsi composed the national epic *Book of Kings* (1010). The great literary epics of postclassical Europe include *The Lusiads* (1572), the national epic of Portugal by Luís (Vaz) de Camões; *Jerusalem Delivered* (1581) by Italian poet Torquato Tasso; *The Prelude* (1850) by English poet William Wordsworth; *Song of Myself* (first version 1855) by American poet Walt Whitman; and *Four Quartets* (1943) by Anglo-American poet T.S. Eliot.

What determines that storytelling leads in the direction of the epic is the emergence of a certain idea, the idea of heroic action. The greater the scale on which circumstances permit him to work, the more easily can the poet expand heroic poetry so as to give expression to the qualities of mind that fit the hero to perform great deeds. If he can then relate the hero and his deeds to the cosmic order and give his poem the sort of general relevance that persuades his patrons not to let it perish, the epic has arrived.”

From The Idea of Epic by J. B. Hainsworth

Definition of Epic Poetry from Aristotle

As to that poetic imitation which is narrative in form and employs a single metre, the plot manifestly ought, as in a tragedy, to be constructed on dramatic principles. It should have for its subject a single action, whole and complete, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. It will thus resemble a living organism in all its unity, and produce the pleasure proper to it. It will differ in structure from historical compositions, which of necessity present not a single action, but a single period, and all that happened within that period to one person or to many, little connected together as the events may be. For as the sea-fight at Salamis and the battle with the Carthaginians in Sicily took place at the same time, but did not tend to any one result, so in the sequence of events, one thing sometimes follows another, and yet no single result is thereby produced. Such is the practice, we may say, of most poets. Here again, then, as has been already observed, the transcendent excellence of Homer is manifest. He never attempts to make the whole war of Troy the subject of his poem, though that war had a beginning and an end. It would have been too vast a theme, and not easily embraced in a single view. If, again, he had kept it within moderate limits, it must have been over-complicated by the variety of the incidents. As it is, he detaches a single portion, and admits as episodes many events from the general story of the war--such as the Catalogue of the ships and others--thus diversifying the poem. All other poets take a single hero, a single period, or an action single indeed, but with a multiplicity of parts. Thus did the author of the Cypria and of the Little Iliad. For this reason the Iliad and the Odyssey each furnish the subject of one tragedy, or, at most, of two; while the Cypria supplies materials for many, and the Little Iliad for eight--the Award of the Arms, the Philoctetes, the Neoptolemus, the Eurypylus, the Mendicant Odysseus, the Laconian Women, the Fall of Ilium, the Departure of the Fleet.

Again, Epic poetry must have as many kinds as Tragedy: it must be simple, or complex, or 'ethical,' or 'pathetic.' The parts also, with the exception of song and spectacle, are the same; for it requires Reversals of the Situation, Recognitions, and Scenes of Suffering. Moreover, the thoughts and the diction must be artistic. In all these respects Homer is our earliest and sufficient model. Indeed each of his poems has a twofold character. The Iliad is at once simple and 'pathetic,' and the Odyssey complex (for Recognition scenes run through it), and at the same time 'ethical.' Moreover, in diction and thought they are supreme.

Epic poetry differs from Tragedy in the scale on which it is constructed, and in its metre. As regards scale or length, we have already laid down an adequate limit:--the beginning and the end must be capable of being brought within a single view. This condition will be satisfied by poems on a smaller scale than the old epics, and answering in length to the group of tragedies presented at a single sitting.

Epic poetry has, however, a great--a special--capacity for enlarging its dimensions, and we can see the reason. ... But in Epic poetry, owing to the narrative form, many events simultaneously transacted can be presented; and these, if relevant to the subject, add mass and dignity to the poem.