

THE EPIC

Definition & Etymology of Epic

It is imperative to know about the etymology of the word *epic*. The word *epic* has been derived a Greek word *epikos*, which means *a word, song or speech*. An epic is well-defined as a long story in verse dwelling upon an important theme in a most elegant style and language. According to Webster's New World dictionary, "*epic is a long narrative poem in a dignified style about the deeds of a traditional or historical hero or heroes; typically a poem like Iliad or the Odyssey with certain formal characteristics.*" An epic is absolutely much like a ballad pretty much in all its features, however just one thing that differentiates epic from a ballad is its length. An epic is a long narrative in verse, while ballad is a short story in verse.

Definition of Epic

Britannica Encyclopedia explains the word epic as:

"epic, long narrative poem recounting heroic deeds. ...literary usage, the term encompasses both oral and written compositions. The prime examples of the oral epic are Homer's Iliad and Odyssey."

Characteristics of an Epic

There are several characteristics of an epic, which distinguishes it from other forms of poetry . They are discussed below:

- The first and foremost characteristic of an epic is its bulky size. An epic is an extensive and prolonged narrative in verse. Usually, every single epic has been broken down in to multiple books. For example, Homer's epics are divided

into twenty four books .Similarly, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* has been divided into twelve books.

- Another essential feature of an epic is the fact that it dwells upon the achievements of a historical or traditional hero, or a person of national or international significance. Every epic extolls the valour, deeds, bravery, character and personality of a person, who is having incredible physical and mental traits.
- Exaggeration is also an important part of an epic. The poet uses hyperbole to reveal the prowess of a hero. He doesn't think twice to use exaggeration to make an impression on the audience.
- Supernaturalism is a must-have feature of an every epic. Without having to use supernatural elements, no epic would certainly produce awe and wonder. There are certainly gods, demons, angels, fairies, and use of supernatural forces like natural catastrophes in every epic. Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Homer's *Iliad*, *Beowulf* and Spenser's *Faerie Queen* are replete with supernatural elements.
- Morality is a key characteristic of an epic. The poet's foremost purpose in writing an epic is to give a moral lesson to his readers. For instance, Johan Milton's *Paradise Lost* is a perfect example in this regard. The poet wants to "justify the ways of God to man" through the story of Adam. This is the most didactic theme of the epic.
- The theme of each epic is sublime, elegant and having universal significance. It may not be an insignificant theme, which is only limited to the personality or the locality of the poet. It deals with the entire humanity .Thus; John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is a great example in this regard. The theme of this

epic is certainly of great importance and deals with entire humanity. It's them is to justify the ways of God to man.

- Invocation to the *Muse* is another important quality of an epic. The poet, at the very beginning of the epic, seeks the help of the *Muse* while writing his epic. Look at the beginning lines of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Paradise Lost*.
- The diction of every epic is lofty, grand and elegant. No trivial, common or colloquial language is used in epic. The poet tries to use sublime words to describe the events.
- Use of Epic Simile is another feature of an epic. Epic simile is a far-fetched comparison between two objects, which runs through many lines to describe the valour, bravery and gigantic stature of the hero. It is also called *Homeric simile*.

Types of Epic

1. Folk Epic

Folk epic is an ancient epic, which was originally in oral form. With the passage of time, one author or many authors tried to preserve them in the form of writing.

Thus, nobody happens to know about the exact authorship of the folk epics. The folk epic is different from the art epic or literary epic in the simplest sense that the former is based on a particular mythology, while the latter is based on the ideas of the author. In art epic, the poet invents the story, while the folk epic is the product of the mythology of the locality. The folk epic is basically in oral form, while the art or literary epic is in written form. The author of the literary epic is a well-known personality, while the author of the folk epic may be a common man.

2. Literary Epic

Literary epic is usually known as art epic. It is an epic, which imitates the conventions of the folk epic, but gives it a written shape. It is absolutely opposite to the folk epic. They were written unlike the folk epics, which came all the way down to us through oral tradition. The literary epics tend to be more polished, coherent, and compact in structure and style when contrasted with the folk epics. Literary epics are the result of the genius of the poet. That is why; they have great significance from literary point of view.