

## What is an Epic?

An epic in its most specific sense is a genre of classical poetry originating in Greece. The conventions of this genre are several:

- (a) It is a long narrative about a serious or worthy traditional subject.
- (b) Its diction is elevated in style. It employs a formal, dignified, objective tone and many figures of speech.
- (c) The narrative focused on the exploits of a hero or demigod who represents the cultural values of a race, nation, or religious group.
- (d) The hero's success or failure will determine the fate of that people or nation.
- (e) The action takes place in a vast setting, and covers a wide geographic area. The setting is frequently some time in the remote past.
- (f) The action contains superhuman feats of strength or military prowess.
- (g) Gods or supernatural beings frequently take part in the action to affect the outcome.
- (h) The poem begins with the invocation of a muse to inspire the poet, a prayer to an appropriate supernatural being. The speaker asks that this being provide him the suitable emotion, creativity, or words to finish the poem.
- (i) The narrative starts *in medias res*, in the middle of the action. Subsequently, the earlier events leading up to the start of the poem will be recounted in the characters' narratives or in flashbacks.
- (j) The epic contains long catalogs of heroes or important characters, focusing on highborn kings and great warriors rather than peasants and commoners.
- (k) The epic employs extended similes (called epic similes) at appropriate spots of the story, and a traditional scene of extended description in which the hero arms himself.

The term applies most directly to classical Greek texts like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* but it is clear that Roman authors like Virgil intentionally imitate the genre in works like the *Aeneid*. However, some critics have applied the term more loosely. The Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* has also been called an epic of Anglo-Saxon culture, Milton's *Paradise Lost* is called an epic of Christian culture, *El Cid* is an epic of Spanish culture, Longfellow's *Hiawatha* is an epic of American culture, and Shakespeare's various History Plays have been collectively called an epic of Renaissance Britain. Contrast with the mock epics of Alexander Pope and later Enlightenment writers to see its influence in humorous form.