

The Odyssey – Epic Poetry

What is an epic?

An epic is a **long narrative poem** in an **elevated style** that deals with the trials and achievements of a great hero or heroes. The epic celebrates virtues of national, religious, or historical significance. It typically emphasizes heroic action as the struggle between a hero's nobility and strength and his human failings or mortality. **Thus, epic poetry often simultaneously glorifies and criticizes the epic hero.**

The earliest epics were works composed and recited **orally** and contain material that is considered mythical. Some argue that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were oral epics, but in the Introduction to Fagles' translation of the *Odyssey*, Bernard Knox questions this thesis and discusses the evidence that, although the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were performed orally, they were written down by "Homer" (5-22). Virgil's *Aeneid* is one of the early literary epics, and it tells of the founding of Rome by the Trojan Prince Aeneas. (Remember him?)

To the ancient Greeks, epic poetry was not just entertainment; it served as a **historical record** and an **educational tool** (religious and worldly).

📖 The Epic Style

Epic poetry is a *genre*, so it has certain key characteristics:

It will begin with an **"Invocation of the Muse,"** a prayer in which the poet asks that the Muse will inspire and help him. The Muses were the nine daughters of Zeus and the Titan Mnemosyne (Memory) who presided over the arts. The Muse of epic poetry was Calliope.

After the opening prayer, an epic will begin the story *in medias res*, in the middle of the story. The earlier chronological events will be told in flashback form later on.

It will contain **epithets**. An **epithet** is a term or phrase used repeatedly to describe the nature or characteristics of a character, object, or event. Examples include

- ❖ *Dawn with her rose-red fingers*
- ❖ *sparkling-eyed Athena*
- ❖ *wine-dark sea*
- ❖ *the nymph with the lustrous braids*

It will contain **epic similes**. As you know, a simile is a comparison of two unlike things using *like* or *as*. An **epic simile** extends the comparisons to expansive proportions. One relatively short example appears when Odysseus and his men blind the Cyclops, and the sound of the Cyclops' eyeball being poked with a hot pole is described: "...the broiling eyeball burst—its crackling roots blazed and hissed—as a blacksmith plunges a glowing ax in an ice-cold bath and the metal screeches steam and its temper hardens—that's the iron's strength—so the eye of the Cyclops sizzled round that stake" (223).

It will have an **epic hero** as the central character. The epic hero will generally be a man with political power (for example, a king, prince, or son of a deity). He will perform many great deeds of courage and skill, even possibly traveling to the Underworld and back. He will not be perfect—see the first paragraph of this handout.

An epic usually involves **supernatural and fantastical beings** (monsters, etc).

An epic often involves **travel** to many far away locations.

An epic's **themes (messages)** celebrate the qualities that a nation or culture would value.