# Beowulf/ The Odyssey: Notes on the Epic

The epic is generally defined as a long narrative poem on a great and serious subject, related in an elevated style, and centered on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, a nation, or the human race. The traditional epics were shaped by a literary artist from historical and legendary materials which had developed in the oral traditions of his nation during a period of expansion and warfare (*Beowulf*, *The Odyssey*, *The Iliad*).

Epic Conventions or characteristics common to both types include:

 1 The hero is a figure of great national or even cosmic importance, usually the ideal man of his culture. He often has superhuman or divine traits.  He has an imposing physical stature and is greater in all ways than the common man.

 2 The setting is vast in scope. It covers great geographical distances, perhaps even visiting the underworld, other worlds, other times.

 3 The action consists of deeds of valor or superhuman courage (especially in battle).

 4 Supernatural forces interest themselves in the action and intervene at times. The intervention of the gods is called "machinery."

 5 The style of writing is elevated, even ceremonial.

 \*all are not always present

 1 Opens by stating the theme of the epic.

 2 Writer invokes a Muse, one of the nine daughters of Zeus.  The poet prays to the muses to provide him with divine inspiration to tell the story of a great hero.

 3 Narrative opens *in media res*. This means "in the middle of things," usually with the hero at his lowest point.  Earlier portions of the story appear later as flashbacks.

 4 Catalogs and histories are given. These long lists of objects, places, and people place the finite action of the epic within a broader, universal context. Oftentimes the poet is also paying homage to the ancestors of audience members.

 5 Main characters give extended formal speeches.

 6 Use of the epic simile.  A standard simile is a comparison using "like" or "as."  An epic or Homeric simile is a more involved, ornate comparison, extended in great detail.

 7 Heavy use of repetition and stock phrases. The poet repeats passages that consist of several lines in various sections of the epic and uses Homeric epithets, short, recurrent phrases used to describe people, places, or things.  Both made the poem easier to memorize.

Aristotle described six characteristics: "fable, action, characters, sentiments, diction, and meter." Since then, critics have used these criteria to describe two kinds of epics:

**Serious Epic**

 • fable and action are grave and solemn

 • characters are the highest

 • sentiments and diction preserve the sublime

 • verse

**Comic Epic**

 • fable and action are light and ridiculous

 • characters are inferior

 • sentiments and diction preserve the ludicrous

 • verse

**The Epic**

 • oral and poetic language

 • public and remarkable deeds

 • historical or legendary hero

 • collective enterprise

 • generalized setting in time and place

 • rigid traditional structure according to previous patterns

**Comic Epic**

 • written and referential language

 • private, daily experience

 • humanized "ordinary" characters

 • individual enterprise

 • particularized setting in time and place

 • structure determined by actions of character within a moral pattern

Homer, the author of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, is referred to as the "Father of Epic Poetry." Based on the conventions he established, classical epics began with an argument and an invocation to a guiding spirit, then started the narrative *in medias res*. In modern use, the term, "epic," is generally applied to all lengthy works on matters of great importance. The Rhapsodoi, professional reciters, memorized his work and passed it on by word of mouth as part of an oral tradition.