THE EPIC IN ENGLISH AND THE WESTERN WORLD

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." 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."

Types of epics:

Epics can broadly be categorized into two main types: Traditional (or Folk) Epic and Literary Epic.

1. Traditional (or Folk) Epic Traditional epics originate from oral tradition. They were originally told by word of mouth and later written down.
   Features:
   ➢ Authorship usually unknown.
   ➢ Emerge from collective storytelling traditions.
   ➢ Often reflect early cultural beliefs and traditions.
   Examples: ▪ Beowulf (Old English)
   ▪ The Iliad and The Odyssey by Homer (Ancient Greek)
2. Literary Epic: Literary epics are deliberately written by individual authors who consciously imitate the style and conventions of traditional epics.
   Features:
   ➢Known author who intentionally uses epic conventions.

- ➢ Often more sophisticated in style and thematic depth.
- ➢ Reflect the author's personal vision or commentary.

Examples: • Paradise Lost by John Milton (English)

• The Faerie Queene by Edmund Spenser (English)

• The Aeneid by Virgil (Latin)

The Characteristics of Epic

1. 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.

2. 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.

3. **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.

4. **Supernaturalism** is a must-have feature of 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.

5. **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.

6. 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.

7. **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.

8. 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.

9. **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

Examples of Epics in English Literature:

Beowulf (Old English, c. 8th–11th century CE)

Author: Unknown

The earliest major epic in English literature. It narrates the heroic exploits of Beowulf, a Scandinavian warrior who defeats monstrous adversaries such as Grendel, Grendel's mother, and a dragon, highlighting themes of heroism, honour, and fate.

The Iliad and The Odyssey (Ancient Greek epics) by Homer

The Iliad chronicles events during the Trojan War, emphasizing the hero Achilles.

The Odyssey recounts the long journey home of Odysseus after the war. Though originally Greek, these epics greatly influenced English literature and established many epic conventions followed by later English poets.

The Faerie Queene (1590–1596) by Edmund Spenser

An allegorical epic celebrating Queen Elizabeth I and virtues such as holiness, temperance, chastity, friendship, justice, and courtesy. Each book follows a knight

representing one virtue, set within a magical landscape filled with symbolism and adventures.

Paradise Lost (1667) by John Milton

An epic recounting the biblical story of the Fall of Man, portraying the rebellion of Satan, the temptation of Adam and Eve, and their expulsion from Eden. It explores profound moral and theological issues, showcasing epic conventions such as supernatural intervention, elevated language, and grand scale.

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