The Epic

Definition

In its strict use by literary critics, the term *epic* or *heroic poem* is applied to a work that meets at least the following criteria: it is a long narrative poem an 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" (also called "primary epics" or "folk 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. To this group are ascribed the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of the Greek Homer, and the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*. The "literary" or "secondary" epics were composed by sophisticated craftsmen in deliberate imitation of the traditional form. Of this kind is Virgil's Latin poem *The Aeneid*, which later served as the chief model for Milton's literary epic *Paradise Lost*; and *Paradise Lost* in turn became a model for Keat's fragmentary epic *Hyperion*, as well as for Blake's several epics, or "prophetic books" (*The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, *Jerusalem*) which undertook to translate into Blake's own mythic terms the biblical design and materials which had served as Milton's subject matter.

Characteristics

The epic was ranked by Aristotle (in his *Poetics*) as second only to tragedy, and by Renaissance critics as the highest genre of all. The literary epic is certainly the most ambitious of poetic types, making immense demands on a poet's knowledge, invention , and skill to sustain the scope, grandeur, and variety of a poem that tends to encompass the world of its day and a large portion of its learning. Despite numerous attempts over nearly three-thousand years, we possess no more than a half dozen epic poems of indubitable greatness. Literary epics are highly conventional poems which commonly share the following features, derived ultimately from the traditional epics of Homer:

1. The hero is a figure of great national or even cosmic importance. In the *Iliad*, he is the Greek warrior Achilles, who is the son of a Neried, Thetis; and Virgil's Aeneas is the son of the goddess Aphrodite. In *Paradise Lost*, Adam represents the entire human race, or if we regard Christ as the hero, he is both Goad and man. Blake's primal figure is the "universal man" Albion who incorporates, before his fall, man and god and the cosmos as well.

2. The setting of the poem is ample in scale, and may be worldwide, or even larger. Odysseus wanders over the Mediterranean basin (the whole of the world known to the author), and in Book XI, he descends into the underworld (as does Virgil's Aeneas). The scope of *Paradise Lost* is cosmic, for it takes place on earth, heaven, and in hell.
3. The action involves superhuman deeds in battle, such as Achilles' feats in the Trojan War, or a long and arduous journey intrepidly accomplished, such as the wanderings of Odysseus on his way back to his homeland, despite the opposition of some of the gods. *Para-*

dise Lost includes the war in heaven, the journey of Satan through chaos to discover the newly created world, and his desperately audacious attempt to outwit God by corrupting humanity, in which his success is ultimately frustrated by the sacrificial enterprise of Christ.

4. In these great actions, the gods and other supernatural beings take an interest or an active part—the Olympian gods in Homer, and Jehovah, Christ, and the angels in *Paradise Lost*. These supernatural agents were in the neoclassic age called the *machinery*, in the sense that they were a part of the literary contrivances of the epic.

5. An epic poem is a ceremonial performance and is narrated in a ceremonial style which is deliberately distanced from ordinary speech and proportioned to the grandeur and formality of the heroic subject matter and the epic architecture. Hence Milton's "grand style"—his Latinate diction and stylized syntax, his sonorous lists of names and wide-ranging allusions, and his imitation of Homer's *epic similes* and *epithets*. Also the great *catalogs* of heroes, weaponry, spoils, etc.

Conventions

There are also some commonly adopted conventions in the structure and in the choice of episodes of the epic narrative; prominent among them are these elements:

1. The narrator begins by stating his *argument*, or theme, invokes a muse or guiding spirit to inspire him in his great undertaking, then address to the muse the *epic question*, the answer to which inaugurates the narrative proper (*Paradise Lost*, I.1-49).

2. The narrative starts *in medias res*, i.e., "in the midst of things," at a critical point in the action. *Paradise Lost* opens with the fallen angels in hell gathering their forces and planning their revenge. Not until Books V-VII does the angel Raphael relate to Adam the events in heaven which led to his situation.; while in Books XI-XII, after the fall, Michael foretells to Adam future events up until Christ's second coming. Thus Milton's epic, although its action focuses on the temptation and the fall of man, encompasses all time from the creation to the end of the world.

3. There are catalogs of some of the principle characters, introduced in formal detail, as in Milton's description of the procession of fallen angels in Book I of *Paradise Lost*. These characters are often given set speeches which reveal their diverse temperaments; an example is the debate in Pandemonium, Book II.

The Epic Spirit

In addition to its strict use, the term *epic* is often applied to works which differ in many respects form this model, but manifest, suggests critic E.M.W. Tillyard in his study *The English Epic and Its Background*, the *epic spirit* in the scale, the scope, and the profound human importance of their subjects; Tillyard suggests these four characteristics of the modern epic: high quality and seriousness, inclusiveness or amplitude, control and exactitude commensurate with exuberance, and an expression of the feelings of a large group of people. Similarly, Brian Wilkie has remarked in *Romantic Poets and Epic Tradition*, that epics constitute a family, with variable physiognomic similarities, rather than a strictly definable genre. In this broad sense, Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Spender's *Faerie Queene* are often called epics, as are works of prose fiction such as Melville's *Moby Dick*, and Tolstoy's *War and Peace*; Northrop Frye has described Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* as

the "chief ironic epic of our time" (*Anatomy of Criticism* 323). Some critics have even look to the genre of science fiction—in prose and film—for this century's continuing sense of the *epic spirit*.

Epic Similes

Also called Homeric or extended similes, *epic similes* are formal and sustained similes in which the secondary subject, or *vehicle*, is developed far beyond its specific points of parallel to the primary subject, or *tenor*, becoming the more important aesthetic object for the moment. Essentially, the epic simile is an involved, elaborated comparison imitated from Homer by Virgil, Milton, and other writers of literary epics who employed it to enhance the ceremonial quality of the epic style.

Mock Epic

A *mock epic*, or *mock heroic*, poem imitates the elaborate form and ceremonious style of the *epic* genre, and applies it to a commonplace or trivial subject matter; the high brought low. In a masterpiece of this form, *The Rape of the Lock*, Alexander Pope views through grandiose epic perspective a quarrel between the *beaux* and *belles* of his day over the theft of Belinda's curl. The story includes such elements of epic protocol as supernatural *machinery*, a voyage, a visit to the underworld, the arming of the hero, epic lists, and a heroically scaled battle between the sexes—although with hatpins, snuff, and abusive language for weapons. The term *mock heroic* is often applied to other dignified poetic forms which are purposefully mismatched to a lowly subject; for example, to Thomas Gray's comic "Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat."

Epical Actions

1. Deeds of heroes like Beowulf, Hercules, Prometheus
2. Battles against great odds, like Roland
3. Wars between individual heroes as in the *Iliad*
4. Real voyages as in the *Odyssey*; or allegorical voyages through a different terrain as in the *Divine Comedy*
5. Initiation of great enterprises, as the founding of a new city in *The Aeneid*
6. The performing of exploits, great and important; admirable actions accompanied by difficulty, temptations, and danger

The Epic Hero

The epic hero has a double role. He (there are no epical woman heroes as far as I know) is an individual person with an habitual virtue from which his exploits flow, and he is representative of the group to whom the exploit is important. Since the performance of the exploit is important because of the group rather than the person, the man may be destroyed, yet the group may be saved. The hero's habitual virtue is specific to the kind of exploit; his goodness is not specific—it simply means that he is serious, and he will cope with the problem. The hero need not be responsible for the existence of his task, but only for its performance.

The Primary Epic

Literary Tradition

Possible accumulation of lays or episodes. 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. Composed without the aid of writing, sung or chanted to a musical accompaniment.

Composition

Looser composition because it was composed for recitation. More episodic—the episodes can be detached from the whole and may be enjoyed as separate poems or stories.

Heroic Ideal

The heroes in the oral epic are more concerned with their own personal self-fulfillment. The work focuses on the personal concept of heroism, and the self-fulfillment and identity of the individual hero. The national concept is secondary.

Language

Formulaic, repetitious use of stock phrases and descriptions to aid in oral recitation. Tends toward pleasing the ear rather than the eye. Focus on the spoken word.

Movement

Cyclical, the theme of the return.

Cultural Origin

In cultures that have not yet attained a national identity or unity. Greek city-states, etc.

Examples

The Iliad, *The Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, *Gilgamesh*

The Secondary Epic

Literary Tradition

Secondary epics are also called *literary epics*. Composed by sophisticated craftsmen in a deliberate imitation of the traditional form. An attempt to use again in new circumstances what has already been a complete and satisfactory form of literature.

Composition

More structured and written for readers. The written word. The concern is with the perfection of the word; sentences are carefully fashioned; words and phrases are more carefully chosen. Less use of formulaic repetition.

Heroic Ideal

The hero is more concerned with national or universal duty than with personal happiness or self-fulfillment (e.g., Aeneas leaves Dido to continue his nation's destiny). In a highly organized society, the unfettered individual has no place. The hero is inspired by service to his nation, world, or cosmos, not by individual prowess. Social ideal replaces personal identity. The hero becomes a symbol for the nation or world as a whole.

Language

A written ceremony. A deliberate distancing from ordinary speech and proportioned to the grandeur and formality of the heroic subject matter and epic architecture. The "grand," "ornate," and "elevated" style.

Movement

Toward rebirth. Aeneas leaves old Troy to found new Troy (Rome).

Cultural Origin

Highly structured cultures and societies.

Examples

The Aeneid, *Paradise Lost*, *The Divine Comedy*

Comparison/Contrast between the Heroic Concepts of Homer and Virgil

Homer	Virgil
Composed for recitation and for an audience	Written for readers
Freer and looser; less closely patterned	Concerned with perfection of the word—exquisite words
Integral/discrete episodes	A stylist—concerned with reader's scrutiny
Oral art	Fashions sentences carefully
Operates with phrases and formulas	Poetical texture
Simplicity, strength, straightforward	Social ideal of heroism
Values physical prowess and intellectual wit of the individual	Political (national) ideal of heroism
Fame of individual heroes; personal concept of heroism	Sacrifice of the hero's personal identity
Self-fulfillment and identity of the individual hero—no national concept	Love concern—romance

Epic Classification

Iliad

Menis—song of wrath

Odyssey

Tradition of the epic of return (*nostos*). The story of the romance of a hero escaping incredible perils and arriving in the nick of time to reclaim his bride—a master of the house coming back to reclaim his own.

Aeneid

Develops the theme of return into one or rebirth; the end in New Troy becomes the starting point renewed and transformed by the hero's quest.

Christian Epic

Carries the same themes into a wide archetypal context; the action of the Bible includes the themes of the three great classical epics: theme of destruction and captivity of the city (Troy) in the *Iliad*; the theme of the return in the *Odyssey*; the theme of building a new city in the *Aeneid*. Adam is like Achilles , Odysseus, and Aeneas—a man of wrath, exiled from home because he angered God by going beyond his limit as a man. A provocation against God is the eating of food reserved for the deity. As with Odysseus, Adam's return home is contingent on appeasing of divine wrath by divine wisdom.