

# The Elements of the Epic

by Carleen Ibrahim (<http://www.classicscafe.com/epic.html>)

"Epic" is a term that we often hear to describe long books and movies; however, that definition of the term applies only to current attitudes, not to literature. A book might have more than 300 pages, or a movie might last longer than 90 minutes, but length or time alone does not qualify them for inclusion in the epic genre. The contemporary use of the term ignores the long-established conventions that make the true epic. Anyone who knows and loves horror films expects to find certain things in every one—a beautiful young girl who is chased by the bad guy, dark rooms, false surprises, a scene shot in the rain, a spooky old house. Ancient Greek stories were constructed in a similar fashion with "conventions" that the audience expected to hear during the poem's recitation. **Conventions, not length, make an epic.**

One of the oldest literary forms is the epic poem. Since nearly all cultures, both oral and literate, have epic tales of heroes, we can say with confidence that it is a universal genre. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Homer's famous epic poems about the Trojan War, have become the models for Western literature. Anyone who wants to write a true epic must follow the pattern, called epic conventions that Homer outlined in *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Although the epic poet no longer has to memorize and recite the whole poem as he did in Homer's day, the qualities of the epic have not changed much over the centuries. The epic poet's primary talent does not come from his ability to make up new material for his poem; instead, his talent is measured by how well he can retell a familiar story in an exciting way. When an audience sat around the campfire to listen to the tales of Achilles' exploits in Troy or Odysseus' journey back to Ithaca when the war ended, they already knew the stories because they had become an accepted part of Greek history. To keep an audience interested in hearing an old familiar tale, the poet had to devise a way to keep it exciting and interesting, and he did this through the use of epic conventions.

An epic will always begin **in medias res**, a Latin phrase meaning "in the middle of things." In other words, whatever event that the poet is going to tell his audience about has already happened, and the story begins right in the middle of the action resulting from that event. In the Homeric tradition, the action involves deeds of great valor.

The poet will start the poem with an **invocation to the muse**. To make certain that he tells his tale in the best possible way, the poet will pray to his muse and ask her to guide him as he recites the deeds of heroes. The invocation will also state the immediate problem at hand and the theme of the whole poem. Homer's opening line of the *Iliad* does this very well: "Sing O Muse, of the rage of Achilles." In this one line Homer achieves the following things:

- he asks the muse to guide him as he tells the story of Achilles' rage,
- he informs his audience that the theme of his poem is rage,
- he has established the fact that whatever it is that made Achilles angry, it has already happened.

That's quite an accomplishment in so few words! Now the poet can begin to fill in the missing pieces of the puzzle.

Because the poet will tell the story of a hero, he must use appropriate language. Epics have to be written using the best words that the language has to offer, and they must have a **formal, elevated style**. That means that although slang or vernacular language might have made the poet's job easier, using it would not celebrate the deeds of the hero in the best fashion. "Hey muse, help me tell these folks what made Achilles so ticked off" just doesn't have the same powerful effect as Homer's original opening line.

As the poet begins to relate the events, he will decorate his words with figurative language. Epics must have **epithets**—two word phrases attached to a name that point out an important feature of the person's personality, character, or appearance. Some of Homer's most famous epithets include:

- swift-footed Achilles
- white-armed Hera
- rosy-fingered Dawn
- wine-dark sea

The epithets are used throughout the poem, but the poet will vary them. For example, Menelaus may be one of the "twin eagles," but he is also the "red-haired king."

**Epic similes**, another use of figurative language that is essential to the epic, are long and elaborate comparisons usually derived from nature and involving a process. In the *Iliad*, Homer compares Achilles to a race horse to demonstrate the speed, beauty, and strength of the hero. A couple of other epic similes include:

- "the whole army stirred as when the west wind shakes the deep standing grain with hurricane gusts that flatten down the stalks"
- "as quick as a mother flicks a fly from her baby sleeping softly, so did Athena's hand flick the arrow away from Menelaus"

Another descriptive technique that the poet will use is the **catalog**, a list—some long and some short—of important items or people (think of the all the "begats" in the Bible) relevant to the poem. Homer gives his audience a catalog of the ships setting off for Troy before the battle. Using the catalog enables the poet to show the significance of the events. In the case of the *Iliad*, because so many ships are involved, the audience knows that the war is monumental in both size and importance. The longer the list of items in the catalog, the greater the event.

Length is also important in dialogue, and an epic will have several **long monologues** spoken by the key characters. Often these speeches involve flashbacks relating events that led up to the moment of crisis that opened the poem.

Perhaps the most entertaining sections of an epic involve **supernatural intervention**. The ancient Greek deities were a meddling bunch, and they frequently took sides in mortal conflicts, helping those they supported and interfering with those they did not. The *Iliad* contains several instances of supernatural intervention. One example occurs in Book 1. Achilles, who needed to take a class in anger management, puts his hand on his dagger with the intention of killing Agamemnon. Suddenly, Athena comes down from Olympus and stops him from murdering the king.

Because the epic tells the story of a hero, it is important that the audience know that he has been adequately prepared for battle. To accomplish this feat, the poet will include a detailed scene describing the **arming of the hero**. In the *Iliad*, Homer gives us a detailed account of the shield that Hephaestus, smithy of the gods and Aphrodite's husband, made for Achilles.

At some point in the story the hero will make a **journey to the underworld**. While he is there, the hero will get a chance to see heroes who have died before him, talk with kings, and see his deceased family members. Sometimes, one or more of the people that the hero meets in the underworld will have important information for him that will help him to fulfill his quest. A good example of this comes in the *Odyssey*. When Odysseus makes the journey to the underworld, he hears conflicting advice about the fidelity of women. Agamemnon, whose wife took a lover while he was off fighting in Troy and who killed him when he came home, tells Odysseus that he needs to hurry up and get home because chances are that Penelope, Odysseus' wife, has been unfaithful to him. Later, Odysseus sees his mother who died while he has been away. She tells Odysseus that he has nothing to worry about because Penelope still waits patiently for his return to Ithaca.

Finally, an epic must relate the exploits of an **epic hero**, who also has to meet certain conventional criteria:

- he will have previously proven his valor in battle
- he is usually a national hero, but can be a universal hero (i.e., Jesus in John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*)
- he is favored by the gods
- he is often quasi-divine (one of his parents is a deity—god or goddess)
- he holds the fate of an entire nation, tribe, or other large group in his hands
- he performs superhuman actions
- he is superior to other humans in degree and kind
- he is overzealous of a moral principle or ideal
- his downfall is caused by lesser people, but he does not die in the epic

Achilles fits this model perfectly. As a warrior, Achilles had already proven his ability to fight and win, and he was a national hero. In fact, the Greeks were dependent upon him to win the war against Troy. His mother, Thetis, was a goddess; Athena, Hera, Hephaestus, and Poseidon favor and assist him throughout the story. After he withdraws from the conflict out of anger with Agamemnon, the Greeks (called Argives, Danaans, or Achaeans in the *Iliad*) begin to suffer serious losses, and they all know that the final outcome of the Trojan War rests squarely on Achilles' shoulders. If he does not rejoin them, the Greeks will not win the war. Although the *Iliad* is filled with heroes who have also proven themselves in previous battles, it is Achilles who holds the highest esteem and honor among them; he is superior to all the other heroes. Achilles' rage stems from Agamemnon's unjust decision to take Briseis, Achilles' war prize. As a result, Achilles becomes a moral crusader for justice; his decision to withdraw from the war until Agamemnon apologizes and returns Briseis to him demonstrates his overly zealous nature. Finally, the *Iliad* does not end with the death of the hero—Achilles dies later in another story.