

# The Epic in English and Western World

# Definition and Types

- An epic is a lengthy narrative poem that often recounts the heroic deeds, adventures, and events significant to a culture or nation.
- Epics generally showcase the values, traditions, and beliefs of the society from which they originate.
- 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)

# Characteristics of an Epic

## **1. Heroic Figure:**

Central protagonist of noble birth or legendary importance, embodying the values of their society.

## **2. Grand Scope:**

Vast settings covering many nations, worlds, or even cosmic realms.

## **3. Supernatural Elements:**

Inclusion of gods, mythical creatures, and magical occurrences influencing events.

## **4. Elevated Language and Style:**

Formal diction, lofty expressions, and poetic devices such as similes, metaphors, and epithets.

## **5. Invocation of the Muse:**

Traditionally, epics begin with an invocation to a deity or muse to aid in storytelling.

## **6. In Medias Res (In the Middle of Things):**

The narrative often begins midway into the action rather than at the start of events.

## **7. Moral and Ethical Lessons:**

Conveyance of significant moral teachings, virtues, and universal truths.

## **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.