

## The Epic

An epic is an extremely long narrative poem. It has been defined by the Greek Aristotle, who said that an epic is an:

...imitation of life which is narrative in form and poetic meter. It has for its subject a single action, whole and complete. The characters celebrated should be of lofty type and consistently presented. The subject matter should deal with the probably impossible rather than the improbably possible.

The conditions necessary for developing an epic seem to be a heroic age or period for the background, a good story from the past, a main character whose exploits are legendary rather than historical, and an inspired poet. Sometimes the identity of the poet is unknown.

There are three types of epic. The **Folk Epic** originated among the people and passed through a long period of telling and retelling before it was finally written down. It reflects the life and thought of the people who created it.

The **Literary Epic** is the conscious effort of a known writer. The literary epic also reflects to some extent the thoughts and opinions of the age in which it was written.

The **Mock Epic** is a satire which exploits the epic form.

The essentials of any epic may be summarized as follows:

**Plot:** a unified story, the direct action of which is short, but the implied action of which is on a sweeping scale.

**Characterization:** one heroic, central character plus some superhuman agents

**Setting:** the distant past, of legendary rather than historical record.

**Mood:** noble and dignified, usually also rebellious and sublime.

**Poetic Form:** majestic verse which employs certain arts or devices such as formal introduction called "the invocation to the muse", a roll call of important characters, and lofty speeches descriptive of persons, places, and events.

Some Epics: The Odyssey by Homer and Beowulf – **Folk Epics**

Paradise Lost by Milton and The Divine Comedy by Dante – **Literary Epics**

"The Rape of the Lock" by Pope is a mock epic.