

HUM 200 Survey of Humanities

Types of Epic & Homer

- **Epic**, long narrative poem, majestic both in theme and style. Epics deal with legendary or historical events of national or universal significance, involving action of broad sweep and grandeur. Most epics deal with the exploits of a single individual, thereby giving unity to the composition. Typically, an epic includes several features: the introduction of supernatural forces that shape the action; conflict in the form of battles or other physical combat; and stylistic conventions such as an invocation to the Muse, a formal statement of the theme, long lists of the protagonists involved, and set speeches couched in elevated language. Commonplace details of everyday life may appear, but they serve as background for the story and are described in the same lofty style as the rest of the poem.
- The Greeks distinguished epic from lyric poetry, both by its nature and its manner of delivery; lyric poetry expressed more personal emotion than epic poetry and was sung, whereas epic poetry was recited.
- Epic poems are not merely entertaining stories of legendary or historical heroes; they summarize and express the nature or ideals of an entire nation at a significant or crucial period of its history. Examples include the ancient Greek epics by the poet Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The characteristics of the hero of an epic are national rather than individual, and the exercise of those traits in heroic deeds serves to gratify a sense of national pride. At other times epics may synthesize the ideals of a great religious or cultural movement. *The Divine Comedy* (1307-1321) by the Italian poet Dante Alighieri expresses the faith of medieval Christianity. *The Faerie Queene* (1590-1609) by the English poet Edmund Spenser represents the spirit of the Renaissance in England and like *Paradise Lost* (1667) by the English poet John Milton, represents the ideals of Christian humanism.

Folk Epics

- Epic verse may be classified either as folk or as literary epic. Folk, or popular, epics are believed to have developed from the orally transmitted folk poetry of tribal bards or other authors; they were eventually transcribed by anonymous poets. Well-known examples of the folk epic are the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf* (8th century), the German *Nibelungenlied* (Song of the Nibelungs, 13th century), and the Indian epics the *Mahabharata* (Great Story, 300 BC-AD 300) and the *Ramayana* (Story of Rama, 3rd century BC). The story material appearing in folk epics is usually based on legends or events that occurred a long time before the epic itself appeared. The characters and episodes that appear in many folk epics had, in several cases, been treated in folk songs before the epic was composed. Examples of this consolidation of material are the French folk epics known as chansons de geste, or songs of heroic deeds, composed from the end of the 10th century to the middle or end of the 11th century, the most famous of which is the *Chanson de Roland* (The Song of Roland, 1100?).
- In some cultures the popular epic material has never actually been gathered together into an epic. The Celts produced extended cycles of epic poems, notably the Fenian, or Ossianic, Cycle and the Arthurian Cycle but developed no single great poem using this or similar material. Spain has a national heroic figure, El Cid, but, with the exception of *El cantar de mio Cid* (The Song of the Cid, 1200?), the ballads and poems about him never achieved epic proportions.

Literary Epics

- Literary, or art, epics are the creation of known poets who consciously employ a long-established form. Like folk epics, literary epics deal with the traditions, mythical or historical, of a nation. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are regarded as literary epics. In Rome, national epic poetry reached its highest achievement in the 1st century BC in the *Aeneid*, one of the world's greatest literary epics, by the poet Vergil. In Persia the poet Firdawsi, drawing upon historical sources, composed the Persian national epic *Shah-Namah* (Book of Kings, 1010). The great literary epics of postclassical Europe include *The Lusiads* (1572; translated 1655), the national epic of Portugal by Luís (Vaz) de Camões; the Italian *Orlando furioso* (Mad Roland, first version 1516; final version 1532) by Lodovico Ariosto, and *Rinaldo* (1562) and *Jerusalem Delivered* (1581; translated 1600) by Torquato Tasso; as well as *The Faerie Queene* and *Paradise Lost*.
- In the 19th century the epic assumed various forms. In the lengthy and much revised autobiographical poem *The Prelude* (1850), the English poet William Wordsworth used the events of his life to explore the power of the human imagination. With *Don Juan* (1818-1824) the English poet Lord Byron revived the *ottava rima* serio-comic epics of the Italian Renaissance (14th century to 17th century), using a breezy style that incorporated social commentary into the poem. *Song of Myself* (first version 1855; final version 1892) by the American poet Walt Whitman is a brief epic, the first-person narrator of which identifies himself with all of nature and humanity.
- Twentieth-century English epics include *The Dynasts* (1903-1908), a long verse-drama by the poet Thomas Hardy. In the United States, such 20th-century poets as Hart Crane (*The Bridge*, 1930), T.S. Eliot (*Four Quartets*, 1943), Ezra Pound (*The Cantos*, 1930-1970), William Carlos Williams (*Paterson*, 1946-1958), and James Merrill (*The Changing Light at Sandover*, 1976-1982) attempted to provide the nation with a national epic.

The Mock Epic A type of epic derived from the serious epic is the mock epic, which satirizes contemporary ideas or conditions in a form and style burlesquing the serious epic. Noted mock epics include *The Rape of the Lock* (1712) by the English poet Alexander Pope. Several novels also fall into this category, including *Joseph Andrews* (1742), described by its author, the English novelist Henry Fielding, as “a comic epic ... in prose.”

- **Homer**, name traditionally assigned to the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the two major epics of Greek antiquity. Nothing is known of Homer as an individual, and in fact the question of whether a single person can be said to be responsible for the creation of the two epics is highly controversial. Linguistic and historical evidence, however, allows the supposition that the poems were composed in the Greek settlements on the west coast of Asia Minor sometime in the 9th century BC.
- **The Iliad.** Both epics deal with legendary events that were believed to have occurred many centuries before their composition. The *Iliad* is set in the final year of the Trojan War, which forms the background for its central plot, the story of the wrath of the Greek hero Achilles. Insulted by his commander in chief Agamemnon, the young warrior Achilles withdraws from the war, leaving his fellow Greeks to suffer terrible defeats at the hands of the Trojans. Achilles rejects the Greeks' attempts at reconciliation, but he finally relents to some extent, allowing his

companion Patroclus to lead his troops in his place. Patroclus is slain, and Achilles, filled with fury and remorse, turns his wrath against the Trojans, whose leader, Hector (son of King Priam), he kills in single combat. The poem closes as Achilles surrenders the corpse of Hector to Priam for burial, recognizing a certain kinship with the Trojan king as they both face the tragedies of mortality and bereavement.

- **The *Odyssey*.** The *Odyssey* describes the return of the Greek hero Odysseus from the Trojan War. The opening scenes depict the disorder that has arisen in Odysseus' household during his long absence: A band of suitors is devouring his property as they woo his wife Penelope. The focus then shifts to Odysseus himself. The epic tells of his ten years of traveling, during which he has to face such dangers as the man-eating giant Polyphemus and such subtler threats as the goddess Calypso, who offers him immortality if he will abandon his quest for home. The second half of the poem begins with Odysseus' arrival at his home island of Ithaca. Here, exercising infinite patience and self-control, Odysseus tests the loyalty of his servants, plots and carries out a bloody revenge on Penelope's suitors, and is reunited with his son, his wife, and his aged father.
- **Epic Style.** Both epics are written in impersonal, elevated, formal verse, employing language that was never used for ordinary discourse; the metrical form is dactylic hexameter. Stylistically no real distinction can be made between the two works. It is easy, however, to see why, since antiquity, many readers have believed that they come from different hands. The *Iliad* deals with passions, with insoluble dilemmas. It has no real villains; Achilles, Agamemnon, Priam, and the rest are caught up, as actors and victims, in a cruel and ultimately tragic universe. In the *Odyssey*, on the other hand, the wicked are destroyed, right prevails, and the family is reunited—with rational intellect, Odysseus' in particular, acting as the guiding force throughout the story.
- **The Homeric Hymns.** Besides the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the so-called Homeric Hymns, a series of relatively short poems celebrating the various gods and composed in a style similar to that of the epics, have also traditionally been attributed to Homer.
- **The “Homeric Question.”** The modern text of the Homeric poems was transmitted through medieval and Renaissance manuscripts, themselves copies of now-lost ancient manuscripts of the epics. From classical antiquity until recently, Homer's readers, although they may have distrusted the spurious tales describing him as a blind beggar bard of Chios, and although they may have argued that portions of the texts, such as the concluding scenes of the *Odyssey*, were added by another hand, generally believed that Homer was a poet (or at most, a pair of poets) much like the poets they knew from their own experience. They believed, in short, that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, although of course based on traditional materials, were independent, original, and largely fictional.
- In the last 200 years, however, this view has changed radically, following the emergence and endless discussion of the “Homeric question”: By whom, how, and when were the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* composed? A generally accepted answer has never been found. In the 19th and 20th centuries “analysts” argued that internal inconsistencies proved that the poems were collections, or accretions, of short, independently composed lays; “unitarians,” on the other hand, countered that these inconsistencies were insignificant or imaginary, and that the overall unity of the epics proved that each was the artistic product of a single mind. More recently, scholarly discussion has centered on the theory of “oral-formulaic composition,” according to which an elaborate system of traditional poetic diction (for example, such noun-epithet combinations as “swift-footed Achilles”)—a system that can only be the product of the combined efforts of generations of heroic bards—is the principal constituent element in the poems now extant.

- No one view on this issue has prevailed, but it is fair to say that practically all commentators would agree, on the one hand, that tradition had a great deal to do with the poems' composition, and, on the other, that in the main each epic bears the strong impress of a single creator. Meanwhile, archaeological discoveries of the last 125 years, especially those of Heinrich Schliemann, have shown that much of the civilization Homer described was not fictional; the epics are therefore, to a certain extent, historical documents, and discussion of this facet of them has constantly been intertwined with the debate on the question of their creation.
- **Influence.** In a direct way Homer was the parent of all succeeding Greek literature; drama, historiography, and even philosophy all show the mark of the issues, comic and tragic, raised in the epics and the techniques Homer used to approach them. For the later epic poets of Western literature, Homer was of course always the master (even when, like Dante, they did not know the works directly); but for his most successful followers, curiously enough, his work was as much a target as a model. Vergil's *Aeneid*, for instance, is a refutation of the individualistic value system of the Homeric epic; and the most Homeric scenes in *Paradise Lost*, by the English poet John Milton—those stanzas describing the battle in heaven—are essentially comic. As for novels, such as *Don Quixote* (1605), by the Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes, or *Ulysses* (1922), by the Irish writer James Joyce, the more Homeric they are, the more they lean toward parody and mock epic. Since Homer's time, in fact, an unabashed heroic ethos and the erudition necessary to appreciate Homer have never been combined in a serious author, and it seems unlikely that they ever will be.
- Among English translations of Homer, the earlier versions of George Chapman (1616) and Alexander Pope (*Iliad*, 1715-20; *Odyssey*, 1725-26) stand out as permanent classics. In contemporary English verse, the reader can choose between the highly literal renditions (1951, 1967) of the American poet Richmond Lattimore and the versions (1961, 1974) of Robert Fitzgerald, another American poet, which tend to be freer and are often considered more readable.

Joyce, James Augustine Aloysius (1882-1941), Irish novelist and poet, whose psychological perceptions and innovative literary techniques, as demonstrated in his epic novel *Ulysses*, make him one of the most influential writers of the 20th century. Joyce attained international fame with the publication (1922) of *Ulysses*, a novel, the themes of which are based on Homer's *Odyssey*. Primarily concerned with a 24-hour period in the life of an Irish Jew, Leopold Bloom, *Ulysses* describes also the same day in the life of Stephen Dedalus, and the story reaches its climax in the meeting of the two characters. The main themes are Bloom's symbolic search for a son and Dedalus's growing sense of dedication as a writer. Joyce further developed the stream-of-consciousness technique in this work as a remarkable means of character portrayal, combining it with the use of mimicry of speech and the parody of literary styles as an overall literary method.