

The Development of the Epic

In the Beginning Were Stories

Before written language and literature, there were stories. People told stories for entertainment, certainly. But they also created stories to define themselves as human beings and to explain their place in the universe. These stories, passed on orally from one generation to the next, became an early form of history.

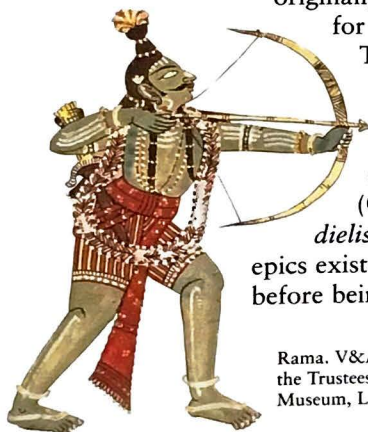
The Nature of an Epic

These stories from the oral tradition provided the raw material for one of the oldest forms of literature, the epic. An epic is a long narrative poem that tells the deeds of a great person, an **epic hero**. In epics, myth and legend are woven into rich tapestries that express the core values and beliefs of particular cultures. Epics can also serve religious and nationalistic purposes. The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, two great epics of India, are as sacred to Hindus as the Bible is to Christians. The *Shah-nameh*, the national epic of Persia, glorifies Persia's past and justifies the rule of its kings.

Some of the translations of ancient epics you will encounter are in prose. Most likely, you've read an epic silently, alone. But all epics were

originally composed as poetry for public performance.

They were sung or recited by professional poets, known in different cultures as *scops* (Anglo-Saxon), *bards* (Celtic), *sutas* (Indian), or *dielis* (West African). Some epics existed for hundreds of years before being written down.



Rama. V&A Picture Library. Courtesy of the Trustees of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

Features of Epic Poetry

A feature of many epic poems is the repetition of particular words, phrases, and grammatical structures. In some cases, perhaps, such repetition served to help the poet with the difficult task of memorization. For example, when Gilgamesh stands at Siduri's gate, he identifies himself in this way:

... I am Gilgamesh who seized and killed the Bull of Heaven, I killed the watchman of the cedar forest, I overthrew Humbaba who lived in the forest, and I killed the lions in the passes of the mountain.

—*The Epic of Gilgamesh*

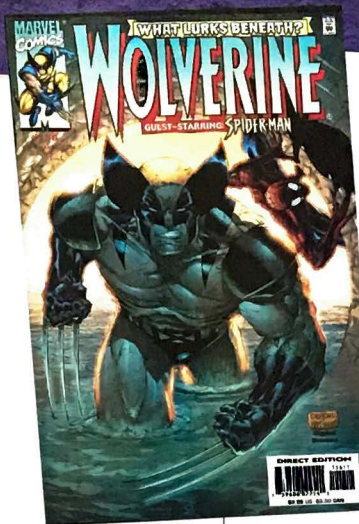
Siduri replies by repeating what Gilgamesh just said: "If you are that Gilgamesh who seized and killed the Bull of Heaven, . . ." When epics were recited, repetitions also served as summaries of already presented actions, to help listeners remember what had happened before.

Another feature of many epics is the use of **epithets**—words or short phrases that highlight key qualities of characters or objects. For example, in the excerpt from the *Mahabharata*, the hero Arjuna is called "king of men" and "Terrifier."

A Larger-Than-Life Hero

An epic hero has to be larger than life—the strongest, the smartest, the bravest, the best—because such a hero represents a culture's ideal. Most epic heroes are part divine. Gilgamesh is "two-thirds a god." The Pandava brothers in the *Mahabharata* were fathered by gods. In the *Ramayana*, Prince Rama is actually an embodiment of the god Vishnu.

Even an epic hero who is semidivine, however, usually has very recognizable human traits. Gilgamesh may have superhuman strength and courage, but he suffers and dies like the rest of



us mortals. He also makes mistakes, such as losing the magic plant that could have restored his youth. Arjuna, the “king of men” in the *Mahabharata*, seems perfect until Book 6 of the epic, when he loses his will to fight. In this episode, called separately the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the god Krishna has to convince Arjuna to do his duty (see page 128).

Characteristics of an Epic

Epics from different cultures can be very different. The Hindu epics are much more spiritual than the earthy *Epic of Gilgamesh*, for instance. However, most epics share these basic characteristics:

- The epic hero is usually male and holds a high position in society. He may be a king or a prince and is almost always an important historical or legendary figure.
- The hero’s actions reflect the values of a culture; the hero’s character embodies the culture’s ideals.
- The epic setting is vast in scope, often involving the heavens and the underworld.
- The plot may be complicated by supernatural beings or events, and it may involve a dangerous journey.
- The tone of the epic is serious; characters often make long, formal speeches.
- The epic treats universal themes, such as good and evil, and expresses universal values, such as honor and courage.

The Epic Today

The epic is alive and well in the world today. Traditional and newly imagined epics offer writers and filmmakers a ready source of themes, action heroes, and special effects. A television version of the *Ramayana* captivated Indian viewers for 78 weeks in the late 1980s. Western audiences have never tired of the Greek *Odyssey*. Epic conflicts and heroes enliven much science fiction and fantasy, such as *Star Wars* and the *Dune* novels.

In the United States today, perhaps the closest equivalents of epic heroes can be found in the pages of comic books. Superman, Wonder Woman, and the X-Men all have supernatural powers and fight evil to save the world. Perhaps when you were young, you dreamed of being such a hero.

YOUR TURN What have you read or seen lately that contained elements of an epic? Who was the hero?

Strategies for Reading: The Epic

1. Notice which specific character traits help the epic hero to succeed.
2. Decide what values the epic hero reflects.
3. Determine whether these values are still valid today.
4. Keep a list or chart of supernatural events to see how important they are in the epic.
5. Reread passages that appear confusing.
6. Monitor your reading strategies, and modify them when your understanding breaks down. Remember to use the strategies for active reading: **predict, visualize, connect, question, clarify, and evaluate.**