

The Poetry of John Milton:

The Homeric Epic and Milton's Adaptation of Its Conventions

Classical Epic began with Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and was fully crystallized as a genre with Vergil's *The Aeneid*. A Classical Epic can be broadly defined as a long narrative heroic poem often involving grand journeys or tumultuous battles. Epics are composed of certain traditional conventions, sometimes called *Trappings*. Epics are traditionally divided into chapters, called *Books*, and the epic is twelve books in length or at least multiples of twelve (24, 36, etc.). The first lines of the epic proclaim the *Epic Theme* or single focus of the book, usually designating which hero is the protagonist. Instead of merely reading or reciting the poem, the narrator states he is *singing* the story. He promptly prays to a goddess (in what is called the *Invocation to the Muse*) so his composition of the poem will be truly inspired. Sometimes the narrator will ask the muse to answer questions he poses, or to help him remember details. The narrator often delineates *Epic Lists* of ships or heroes to add grandeur to an occasion and he often employs extended *Epic Similes* as part of his narrative.

Epics traditionally start *In Medias Res*, which means "in the Middle of Things," in the middle of some sort of event like a hurricane or a war, and then later explain the backstory in a series of *Flashbacks*. Early on, there is often an *Epic Council* where various characters discuss and debate what issues they are struggling with and how best to resolve the situation. This is a good way for the storyteller to give the audience a broad theological, political, military, or social context, to introduce a number of characters at once, and to show the alliances and tensions between characters. Sometime later in the story, as a hero prepares for battle, there is often an *Arming of the Hero* scene, which establishes a sense of expectation and sets the above hero as uniquely designated for the great task ahead. Before battle, heroes often hurl challenges and insults at one another in a *Logomachia* or *War of Words*. At some point in the epic, a goddess might descend from the skies (*The Descent of the Goddess*) to give advice, assistance, or gifts to aid the hero. On a rare occasion, the hero must make a *Descent into the Underworld* to achieve some exemplary deed like to discover secret knowledge or to rescue an imprisoned soul.

Paradise Lost employs every element mentioned in the previous two paragraphs. Sometimes, however, it seems to do so in unique, surprising, and perhaps ironic ways. For example, Satan appears to fulfill many of the trappings designated for the epic hero, but so does The Son in defeating Satan in the War in Heaven. The demons in Book Two appear to have an Epic Council in Pandemonium, but the Council between the Father and the Son in Heaven in the next book might make the devilish council seem like mock epic in retrospect. By Book Nine, the narrator claims to shun traditional epic heroism with all its trappings and seeks to establish a new kind of Christian Epic heroism, one not based upon conquest and domination, but rather one based upon the biblical virtues "Of Patience and Heroic Martyrdom / Unsung" (9.32–33). This is a

remarkable new standard for an epic hero, one that redefines the Epic. Who could live up to it? What hero could achieve martial glory by turning the other cheek? Not Achilles. Not Odysseus. Not Beowulf. Not Roland. And how could a poet write an epic after *Paradise Lost* has redefined Epic this way? Perhaps Milton's composition of *Paradise Lost* inadvertently helped kill the genre of Classical Epic. Furthermore, this new "Patience and Heroic Martyrdom" standard begs the question: "Who is the Hero of *Paradise Lost*?" Satan? God, the Son? Adam? Eve? Raphael? Michael? Abdiel? The Narrator? The Reader? For the last three hundred years, critics have failed to arrive at a clear consensus in this lively debate.