

About the Epic

An epic is a long, narrative poem, which contains the following characteristics:

1. *It contains adventure.*
2. *It has a central heroic figure.*
3. *The setting is vast—often covering the entire world.*
(*The Odyssey* even includes a journey to Hades.)
4. *Supernatural forces (gods) are involved.*
5. *An elevated style is used (a serious tone of voice).*

And so, it is essentially a long, narrative poem that covers a vast amount of territory over an extended period of time. Scholars later divided Homer's work into 24 "books," and that has become the standard for any epic poem written. The epic has a standard measure of verse and is written in dactylic hexameter. This means that it has five metrical feet in each line. The first five feet may consist of either a dactyl (a heavy syllable followed by two light ones, - - -), or a spondee (two long sounds, --). Regardless of the pattern used, each line must end in a spondee. This results in each line having between twelve to seventeen syllables, depending on the number of dactyls and spondees used.

The Odyssey is filled with literary techniques that are now the standard for all epic poetry. These include:

Epithets: A repeated description oftentimes was used to meet rhyming/meter requirements (e.g., "rosy-fingered dawn," "wise Odysseus," and "bright-eyed Athena"). Poets devised this method to fulfill the metrical requirements of a poem without changing the meaning of a line. They were also very easy to remember for actors who recited the poetry.

Similes: A comparison of a subject, to something more easily visualized or more familiar to the audience. A simile is easy to recognize, as it always uses the words "like" or "as" (e.g., "Then he advanced on them like a mountain lion who sallies out, defying wind and rain in the pride of his power . . .").

Formal Rhetoric: Long, formal speeches by the characters. (This technique is often used in public speeches.) These can be found throughout *The Odyssey* and are used to better establish the character who speaks. Long speeches are also more practical than short spurts of dialogue between characters and are much easier to memorize and recite.

