

Epic Form and Conventions

by Prof. Richard Kroll, adapted by Alfred J. Drake

Form: “The epic is a long narrative poem involving heroic figures in the performance of heroic deeds, usually extended over a wide geographical area; it is written in a heroic or grandiose manner” (Norton and Rushton). The epic is “a long narrative poem presenting characters of high position in a series of adventures which form an organic whole through their relation to a central figure of heroic proportions and through their development of episodes important to the development of a nation or race” (Thrall and Hibbard).

Major Conventions:

1. Hero: a mythical or historical figure, usually national.
2. Subject matter: heroic deeds, battles, long journeys.
3. Verse: elevated, lofty, “heroic”; the best known device is epic simile -- see PL I.331-343, 351-355, 761-798.
4. Action: an intermixture of supernatural elements or figures with human characters.
5. Place: world-wide, even cosmic, scale.
6. “Comic,” not “tragic”: the hero is successful in his exploits.
7. “Objective” poet: but consider the “Miltonic aside.”

Minor Conventions:

1. Invocation to the muse: PL I.1-26 and elsewhere.
2. Epic statement: PL I.1-5.
3. Epic question: PL I.28-33.
4. “Epic answer”: PL I.34-39.
5. in medias res.
6. Narrative of events that transpired before the beginning of the poem; the “flashback.”
7. Processions of characters: PL I.376-505.
8. Set or formal speeches.

9. Continuous verse form.

Miltonic Conventions:

1. Miltonic inversions (“he seemed for dignity composed, and high exploit”).
2. Omission of words (“And [we] regain the blissful seat”).
3. Parentheses, appositions: PL I.34-44; II.552-54.
4. Use of one part of speech for another (“The great consult began”).
5. Latinizing of diction: expatiate, justify.
6. “Miltonic vagueness”: PL II.666-73, 1048.
7. Avoidance of “simple” sentences.
8. Allusions: PL I.573-97.