

The Epic

Extraordinary heroes and hideous monsters. Brutal battles and dangerous voyages. Spectacular triumphs and crushing defeats. The epic tradition, still very much alive in today's movies and novels, began thousands of years ago with the orally told epic poem. In ancient Greece, listeners crowded around poet-storytellers to hear about the daring exploits of a hero named Odysseus. With its storm-tossed seas, powerful evildoers, and narrow escapes, it's no wonder that Homer's *Odyssey* remains one of most famous epics in Western literature. It captivates us because it is a compelling narrative and a window into a time and place quite different from our own.

Part 1: Characteristics of the Epic

In literature, an **epic** is a long narrative poem. It recounts the adventures of an **epic hero**, a larger-than-life figure who undertakes great journeys and performs deeds requiring remarkable strength and cunning. As *you* journey through many episodes from the *Odyssey*, expect to encounter the following elements.

THE EPIC AT A GLANCE

EPIC HERO

- Possesses superhuman strength, craftiness, and confidence
- Is helped and harmed by interfering gods
- Embodies ideals and values that a culture considers admirable
- Emerges victorious from perilous situations



EPIC PLOT

Involves a long journey, full of complications, such as

- strange creatures
- large-scale events
- divine intervention
- treacherous weather



EPIC SETTING

- Includes fantastic or exotic lands
- Involves more than one nation



ARCHETYPES

All epics include **archetypes**—characters, situations, and images that are recognizable in many times and cultures:

- sea monster
- buried treasure
- epic hero
- wicked temptress
- suitors' contest
- loyal servant



EPIC THEMES

Reflect such universal concerns as

- courage
- a homecoming
- loyalty
- the fate of a nation
- beauty
- life and death



MODEL: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EPIC

Here, the Greek (Achaean) king Menelaus is speaking to his wife, Helen. He recalls the moment when he and Odysseus hid with their fellow soldiers inside a giant wooden horse, waiting to attack the Trojans. Formerly a Trojan herself, Helen stood outside the horse and called to the soldiers inside, mimicking the voices of their wives. As you read, notice the characteristics of an epic that are revealed.

from **BOOK 4: *The Red-Haired King and His Lady***

“In my life I have met, in many countries,
foresight and wit in many first rate men,
but never have I seen one like Odysseus
for steadiness and a stout heart. Here, for instance,
5 is what he did—had the **cold nerve** to do—
inside the hollow horse, where we were waiting,
picked men all of us, for the Trojan slaughter,
when all of a sudden, you came by—I dare say
drawn by some superhuman
10 power that planned an exploit for the Trojans;
and Deiphobus, that handsome man, came with you.
Three times you walked around it, patting it everywhere,
and called by name the flower of our fighters,
making your voice sound like their wives, calling.
15 Diomedes and I crouched in the center
along with Odysseus; we could hear you plainly;
and listening, we two were swept
by waves of longing—to reply, or go.
Odysseus fought us down, despite our craving,
20 and all the Achaeans kept their lips shut tight,
all but Anticlus. Desire moved his throat
to hail you, but Odysseus’ great hands clamped
over his jaws, and held. So he saved us all,
till Pallas Athena led you away at last.”

Close Read

1. King Menelaus mentions several heroic traits that Odysseus exhibited while carrying out his plan to defeat the Trojans. One trait has been **boxed**. Identify two more.
2. What archetype does Helen represent? Explain your answer.
3. Reread lines 8–10 and 23–24. Explain how the gods interfered in the episode that Menelaus is describing.