

## The Principal Requirements of an Epic

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**The Concise Oxford English Dictionary** defines the epic as “a long poem narrating the adventures or deeds of one or more heroic or legendary figures, e.g. the Iliad, Paradise Lost.”<sup>1</sup> According to the **Webster's Dictionary**, the epic notes or pertains to “a long poetic composition, usually centred upon a hero, in which a series of great achievements or events is narrated in an elevated style.”<sup>2</sup> Harry Shaw in his **Dictionary of Literary Terms** calls it “a lengthy narrative poem in which action, characters, and language are on a heroic level and style is exalted and even majestic.”<sup>3</sup> Dr. Johnson in his celebrated **Dictionary of the English Language** defines it thus : “Narrative; comprising narrations, not acted, but rehearsed. It is usually supposed to be heroic, or to contain one great action achieved by a hero.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the epic is a long narrative poem that is majestic in both theme and style. Its action is great and consists of events of national or universal importance. That is, it has “a theme involving universal human problems.”<sup>5</sup> The epic hero is a great man who has attained ultimate height in his own field. The traits of his character are more national than individual, reflecting the fundamental spirit of a culture. Supernatural forces may play a prominent role in epic events. “There are two main types of epic: the popular or national, such as the **Iliad** and **Odyssey** or the Nibelungenlied; and the literary or artificial, such as the **Aeneid** or Ariosto's **Orlando Furioso** or the **Paradise Lost**.”<sup>6</sup>

The Epic has since long enjoyed a certain amount of superiority over other literary genres so much so that the epithet “epic” has come to mean something “grand”. In the words of an eminent critic, “For several reasons, and particularly through the accepted and unchallenged pre-eminence of Homer and Virgil among the world's poets, the heroic or epic poem was accepted, axiomatically, the noblest literary form.”<sup>7</sup> No doubt in his **Poetics**, Aristotle compares it with tragedy which he finds the better of the twain: “... the better of the two is tragedy.”<sup>8</sup> In fact he favoured Tragedy over the Epic because “tragic imitation gains its end in narrower space”<sup>9</sup> and that “the concentrated is more pleasurable than the diluted effect.”<sup>10</sup> Consequently, “the art of the epic has less unity, as is shown by the fact that any one epic makes several tragedies.”<sup>11</sup> But even Aristotle had to accept that there is “greater amplitude in the epic, that ability to deal with more sides of life, which differentiates it from the tragic drama.”<sup>12</sup> It is perhaps because of its “amplitude” that the Epic has been regarded as the most exalted of the poetic forms.

What are the principal requirements of an epic? E.M.W. Tillyard lists four in **The English Epic and its Background**: (a) High quality; (b) Amplitude; (c) Control; (d) Choric quality.

High quality means a dignified subject as well as an elevated style. Milton, for example, shows in **Paradise Lost** his “high seriousness” by stating his solemn theme of justifying God's ways to man in his “grand style”; Sri Aurobindo does the same in **Savitri** by showing triumph of love over Death in his “mantric” style. Really, without a profound subject and an exalted style, we would have, in place of an epic, just a mock-epic. This is amply true of Homer's as well as Valmiki's and Vyasa's epics all of which have high and serious themes and use also a heightened style. All these epics deal with events of national or universal significance and possess thus a broad sweep and grandeur.

Amplitude is another epic requirement. Aristotle too accepts that the epic is far ampler than his favoured tragedy, as it is “unlimited in point of time.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, an epic poet has to work on a vast canvas which provides him scope also for a great deal of variety. Covering more space and time, it contains greater number of characters and episodes than tragedy. In most cases, an epic has a national expanse. Though Aristotle finds that, because of its vast expanse, an epic has less unity than tragedy, a study of the poems cited above proves that, despite multiplicity of characters and events, a successful epic nevertheless possesses the necessary unity of action. And even Aristotle concedes that when he says: “And yet the composition of these poems is perfect ...”<sup>14</sup>

But the right kind of amplitude also includes “variety”—“all the variety of experience and emotion.”<sup>15</sup> In this connection, Tillyard rightly contends that, though **The Fairie Queene** shows “amplitude”, it is not the right kind of “amplitude”. “That he is ample in a sense is obvious from the length of his poem; but is this the amplitude of the right kind?”<sup>16</sup> For the right kind of the epic effect, the poet has to have an eye for not only life's amplitude, but also its variety which necessitates “close observation of the details of human conduct and of the

working of the human mind, a sense of humour, an eye for odd juxtaposition, a feeling for natural phenomena in apparent objectivity.”<sup>17</sup>

Thirdly, an epic must show the poet’s control over the ample material that he is using. That is to say, the work should be well-organised. **The Faerie Queene**, according to Tillyard, fails as an epic because “its organization is rather loose.”<sup>18</sup> **Don Quixote**, in which the same critic finds “the true epic range”, too fails to be a true epic “because it is governed by no powerful predetermination.”<sup>19</sup> Because of “rigorous control and predetermination”<sup>20</sup>, “the true epic creates a ‘heroic impression’.”<sup>21</sup> All this means that an epic must have no loose ends and show a tight organization. Because an epic poet has to work on an ample ground, it may lead to loss of concentration resulting in his losing sight of the whole space and his primary aims: “Very long time spent in composition may tax the will more than is healthy and make a man grim.”<sup>22</sup> Without “control” and “will-power”, we cannot have a true epic “that settles its parts as it goes along”<sup>23</sup> and “retains a general recollection of what has gone before.”<sup>24</sup>

The fourth is the “choric” element of the epic. That is, the epic poet “must express the feelings of a large group of people living or near his own time.”<sup>25</sup> These feelings, though also personal, are shared by a great body of people. “That sharing gives those feelings a peculiar force and flavour, and it forms the psychological ground and justification of the epic kind.”<sup>26</sup> Tillyard cites Abercrombie’s apt phrase which he uses to describe the choric appeal of the epic: the epic poet must present “the accepted metaphysic of the time.”<sup>27</sup> It is the communal or choric element that differentiates epic from tragedy. Tragedy too must bear “some imprint of its own age, but its nature is to be timeless. It deals with the recurrent human passions and, aiming at great simplicity, presents them (having no space to do more) in their bare elements, with not too much local circumstantiation.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, largely because of its limited canvas, tragedy cannot have a deep reference to the times when it is written. So, it does not communicate the feeling of “what it is like to be alive at a certain time.”<sup>29</sup> It, on the other hand, teaches “what it is like to be a human being.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, while the choric element is just casual in tragedy, it is necessary to epic. And still the best epic combines the temporal with the universal. “It is when the tragic intensity coexists with the group-consciousness of an age, when the narrowly timeless is combined in a unit with the variegated temporal, that epic attains its full growth.”<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, the communal or choric element is the hallmark of epic which gives voice to the collective consciousness of an entire nation at a crucial moment of its history. The **Ramayana** and the **Mahabharata**, for instance, give us a vivid picture of the times when they were composed and splendidly portray national character. The same is true of Homer’s two epics which portray graphically those distant times and also reveal the adventurous Greek spirit which later resulted in the marvellous flowering of the Greek culture. **The Aeneid** of Virgil bubbles with the national spirit of Rome while **The Divine Comedy** of Dante presents medieval Christianity. Spenser’s **Faerie Queene** is full of the breath of the English Renaissance while Milton’s **Paradise Lost** represents the ideals of Christian humanism. Thus, a true epic, on the one hand, is the mirror of its times and, on the other presents the dominant ideals of vast multitudes. But “to qualify as the mouthpiece of many, the writer must cause himself to be trusted in a special and profound way.”<sup>32</sup> For that, he must have a strong sense of tradition—of all that has gone before him.

Thus, epic demands arduous preparation on the part of the poet. In the first place, he must possess a profound soul and mind plus an exalted manner. The epic task is thus stupendous and hence cannot claim many adherents. Only the best ones have ever tried their hand at it and out of them, only a minuscule number could succeed so much so that English, otherwise a rich literature, can vaunt a single full-fledged epic of consequence—Milton’s **Paradise Lost**. Moreover, according to Tillyard, the English epic tradition “had persisted before the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>33</sup> So, the Industrial Revolution, among other things, took a toll of the epic spirit also. “Life had become so complicated, so much had been added to the stock of human learning, there was so much ecumenical freedom to exchange ideas, that the epic spanning a total society, like Homer’s or Dante’s, became impossible.”<sup>34</sup>

The modern times are particularly uncongenial for epic composition because of their pervasive tensions and uncertainties. “Nietzsche believed tragedy to be possible only in an age of optimism. Epic, in a similar fashion, must have faith in the system of beliefs or way of life it bears witness to . . . . Only when people have faith in their own age can they include the maximum of life in their vision and exert their will-power to its utmost capacity.”<sup>35</sup> The Modern Age, an Age of Science, is far from being an age of faith. While Science shook the foundations of long-cherished beliefs in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the two World Wars wiped out whatever of the old values had still remained intact. A true epic possesses a synthesizing power. But how is any attempt at synthesis possible in these times of all-round fission?

So, it is really marvellous that an epic like **Savitri**, so full of spiritual warmth and with a universal range, could be conceived and splendidly executed in these terrible times, when “faith” stands literally obliterated. Sri Aurobindo performed a truly superhuman task by composing the lengthiest English epic, which many believe to be the most profound, in more than twenty four thousand lines. The nascent Indo-Anglian

poetry overnight achieved glorious effulgence with the composition of **Savitri**. It contains all the principal requirements of an epic. So, it can be justified as a great modern epic.

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