

## The Genre of Mythology, the Epic Hero, and the Epic Poem

**Mythology** refers to the field of knowledge dealing with the systematic collection, study, and interpretation of myths. The word *mythology* (from Greek, *muthologia*, storytelling: *muthos*, story + *logos*, speech) refers to a body of myths and legends that a particular culture believes to be true about itself and its ancestors, heroes, and deities. The term *myth* commonly refers to the mythology of ancient Greece and Rome. These myths were passed on via the oral tradition until they were later written down, and for many ancient peoples, these myths were an irrefutable reality, generated by social needs and a product of cultural concerns. While legends are based largely on historical events and are focused on human heroes, myths are considered to be symbolic stories that explain natural phenomena, the creation of the world, the establishment of civilization, the nature of humanity, and the organization of the universe.

The *Odyssey* represents the culmination of several ancient Greek myths and legends. It follows a basic pattern of other narratives—known as the hero’s journey—from around the world. This hero performs deeds with great valor and exemplifies certain characteristics that are valued by the society from which the hero originates, and he embodies the cultural and religious beliefs of his people.

Odysseus is the epitome of the **epic hero**. He is the larger-than-life figure who goes on a journey, faces antagonists, and returns home considerably transformed. Performing ordinary tasks that others might find impossible, he is cunning, brave, and superhuman.

An **epic hero** need not exhibit all these traits, but here are some of his essential features:

1. Unusual circumstances surround the hero’s noble birth.
2. He often possesses supernatural abilities or qualities.
3. The hero is on a journey or quest where his worthiness is tested.
4. He encounters women who hinder his progress.
5. He interacts with mythical beings and has human and animal helpers and companions.
6. The hero’s travels take him to supernatural worlds—even the underworld—that mortals are forbidden from entering.
7. The hero reaches a low point where he gives up or is apparently defeated.
8. This *nadir* (an emotional or physical low point) is followed by a resurrection.
9. The journey ends with the restoration of the hero to his rightful place on the throne.

Examples of other epic heroes include: Achilles, Beowulf, Hercules, and King Arthur. There are even epic heroes in video games, though they are sometimes corrupt or become corrupt: Dante (D.M.C.), Kratos (god of war), Sonic the Hedgehog, and Sub-Zero (Mortal Kombat).

The classical epic heroes are the male protagonists of epic poetry.

An **epic poem** is a long narrative piece in an elevated style (using dignified language), celebrating heroic deeds and events significant to a culture or nation. Homer is

sometimes referred to as the father of epic poetry. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are regarded as the first important epic poems, and they define the form. These first epics are known as primary, or original, epics, and were first transmitted orally through song. Epics that attempt to imitate these, such as Virgil's *Aeneid* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, are known as literary, or secondary, epics. Other more modern examples of epic stories in the form of movies include *The Wizard of Oz*, *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings*, the *Harry Potter* series, and *Troy*.

**Epics** have several important characteristics:

1. The hero has a magnificent presence and holds mythical and legendary importance.
2. The setting covers vast geographical distances, including many oceans, nations, and supernatural realms.
3. The conflicts require the hero to perform deeds of superhuman courage, especially in battle.
4. Supernatural forces are perpetually at work throughout the epic.
5. The style of the epic is formal and ceremonial, often with long, formal speeches.
6. The story opens *in media res*, invokes a Muse (a goddess who inspires creativity), and uses heavy repetition.

The *Odyssey*, even after 2,700 years, still captivates audiences. It is read for pleasure, adventure, understanding, and the satisfaction of reading superior literature. The themes—the pitfalls of temptation and the power of cunning over strength—are as timeless as human nature itself. A central virtue in the *Odyssey* is the ability to see another person as potentially like oneself. But perhaps the most compelling part of the poem is its universality: there are the stories of growing up (Telemachus), not giving up (Penelope), and homecoming (Odysseus). Indeed, this epic is an allegory for everyone's personal journey homeward. The myths and legends are combined with realistic narrative to give voice to our innermost fears and desires and speak to the common thread we all share: the human condition.