

EPIC AS A LITERARY GENRE

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Abstract: The epic genre, originally grounded in ancient storytelling practices, has transformed from oral poetry into a diverse narrative form that now encompasses multiple mediums. This article examines the key features of the epic genre, its historical origins, linguistic roots, and its adaptation into contemporary formats like epic novels, films, and video games. Additionally, it delves into the progression of the epic from folk traditions to written literary works, highlighting the thematic, stylistic, and structural elements that define epics across different cultures and time periods.

Key words: epic, cultural ideals, folk, oral traditions, literary forms, style, prose, thematic patterns.

Introduction

The epic genre is among the earliest and most significant forms of narrative literature. Recognized for its vast scope, emphasis on heroic actions, and exploration of cultural ideals, epics have played a key role in human storytelling. This article seeks to offer a scholarly analysis of the epic genre by exploring its origins, defining features, and evolution. Although epics initially emerged as oral poetry, contemporary media have embraced and expanded the genre, influencing new narrative forms in literature, film, and beyond.

Discussion

The word "epic" originates from the Latin term *epicus*, which comes from the Ancient Greek adjective *ἐπικός* (*epikos*) and the noun *ἔπος* (*epos*), meaning "word," "story," or "poem" [Etymonline, 2023]. Originally, it referred to lengthy, narrative poems performed orally that told the tales of heroic deeds. The earliest known epic is the Epic of Gilgamesh, a Mesopotamian work that not only serves as a cornerstone for Western epic poetry but also has a lasting influence on many other cultural mythologies [Dolansky, 2019]. Over time, the definition of the epic broadened, extending beyond poetry to include other narrative forms like novels, films, and video games, each incorporating the essential elements of the genre.

Historical Development and Transformation

1. Ancient Sources

The Epic of Gilgamesh marks the beginning of epic storytelling, exploring themes of heroism, mortality, and the divine. This poem set the stage for other cultural epics, such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which helped solidify the genre's structural and thematic patterns. As time passed, epics continued to develop across different cultures, including the Hebrew Bible, India's *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, and the Greek myths, all of which shared common themes like the hero's journey and the conflict with divine forces [Burgess, 1999].

2. The Transition from Folk to Literary Epics

Folk epics were originally transmitted orally, often performed in royal courts and retold in different versions. As societies increasingly valued written literature, these folk epics were transcribed and preserved as formal literary works. The shift from folk to literary epic is evident in texts like the Iliad and Odyssey, where oral traditions were written down, resulting in a more refined and cohesive narrative structure [Arnott, 2016]. With this shift, the concept of authorship gained prominence, as literary epics began to reflect the intellectual and cultural concerns of individual writers.

3. Defining Characteristics of Epics

Epics share several defining characteristics that distinguish them from other genres. These include:

1. Length

The length of an epic is a key characteristic, with epics generally being much longer than other literary forms, though there is no strict length requirement. They often extend across multiple volumes or sections, forming a grand narrative that covers vast periods of time and extensive settings [Arnott, 2016]. In contemporary media, this has been reflected in long-running novel series, film franchises, or video games.

2. Style

Epics are typically distinguished by a formal, elevated style. The language, whether prose or verse, is serious and majestic, underscoring the significance of the story being narrated. This lofty style creates a sense of separation between the audience and the narrative, enhancing the grandeur and universal themes that define the epic [Burgoyne, 2011].

3. Epic Hero

Central to many epics is the epic hero, a figure who embodies the values and ideals of the culture or society from which the story originates. This hero is typically larger-than-life, with extraordinary traits like strength, wisdom, or leadership [Arnott, 2016]. The hero embarks on a journey, confronting significant challenges and accomplishing remarkable feats that symbolize the collective identity of the community.

4. Mythos and Themes

Epics frequently integrate cultural myths and stories, blending them into the broader narrative. The themes explored in epics generally tackle universal human issues, such as heroism, the struggle between good and evil, and the connection between humans and the divine. The journey of the epic hero often includes battles with powerful adversaries, divine interventions, and the contemplation of profound philosophical or existential questions [Dolansky, 2019].

5. Setting and Conflict

The setting of an epic is typically vast, encompassing entire worlds, nations, or universes. The conflict within an epic is similarly large in scope, often involving the fate of nations or

the world itself. The epic hero's actions have far-reaching consequences, and the resolution of the conflict often has significant moral or cultural implications.

Modern Adaptations of the Epic Genre

The epic genre has evolved into contemporary forms, including the epic novel, epic film, and epic fantasy. With the emergence of the novel as a literary genre, "epic novels" such as Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* emerged, incorporating many classic epic features like grand themes, intricate characters, and a wide historical context [Arnott, 2016].

Epic Fantasy

Epic fantasy, also known as high fantasy, has emerged as a significant subgenre of the epic. Works such as J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* have shaped this subgenre, which is marked by expansive fictional worlds, large-scale battles, and a focus on the hero's journey. Epic fantasy often spans multiple volumes and features intricate world-building, magical systems, and a variety of cultures [Buker, 2002].

Epic Films and Video Games

Movies like *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy serve as prime examples of contemporary cinematic epics. These films uphold the classic epic traits of grand narratives and heroic figures while taking full advantage of modern filmmaking techniques. Likewise, video games like *The Elder Scrolls* and *Mass Effect* integrate elements of epic storytelling, providing players with vast, immersive worlds and hero-centered plots.

Conclusion

The epic genre has a long and storied history, evolving over thousands of years from ancient oral poetry to contemporary adaptations in various forms of media. While the format and medium have changed, the fundamental elements of the epicits length, elevated style, emphasis on a heroic figure, and exploration of universal themeshave remained constant. With the progress of technology and the development of new storytelling techniques, the epic genre continues to evolve, enabling deeper and more expansive explorations of the human experience.

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