Epic Conventions
Or
Characteristics of an Epic

Epic is a long narrative poem in elevated style presenting characters of high position in adventures forming an organic whole through their relation to a central heroic figure and through their development of episodes important to the history of a nation or race.

Epic conventions are things that most epic poems have in common. Structurally, they aren't necessarily identical, but they share these common characteristics.

Some EPIC CONVENTIONS are as follows:

1. ***In medias res.*** *In Medias Res* is Latin for "it begins in the middle of things" and then has flashbacks to explain action leading up to that point. In *THE ILIAD*, for example, the story begins after the war between the combined forces of Greece and the forces of the walled city of Troy and their allies has been in progress for nearly ten years.

2. **Invocation to the Muse.** The story begins with an invocation (prayer) to a god or gods. The poet, who in those days would have been reciting the epic to an audience, say, at a banquet, began by calling for a blessing--for a god or gods to attend this effort of his. They probably literally believed that the called upon god or muse came into them and, therefore, that it was not the poet who recited, but the god in the poet's body. Poet's, then, were considered very sacred, for they could call down a god and have the god in them, at least temporarily. We continue to have remnants of this belief, of course. We often think of poets or of any true artist as being different or touched by a special hand. In the case of the beginning of THE ILIAD, the poet says something like

   > "Sing, goddess of epic poetry, the story of the anger of Achilles."

3. **Statement of theme.** The story begins with a statement of theme. Always, because these poems are so long and so complex, although the basic stories would have been familiar to the audiences, the poet would begin with announcing what the recitation was to be about. That way, everyone could focus and appreciate, not so much WHAT was being said, but the WAY THAT IT WAS PRESENTED. We are no stranger to that concept: we go to concerts where we may already know all of the songs. So, we go to hear the presentation of the songs, which add to our concepts of the meaning and significance of those songs.

4. **Stock epithets.** The story has many epithets. These epithets are re-naming of the characters, gods, or things by stock phrases. An example is the re-naming of Agamemnon and Menelaus as "Atreus' two sons" or "the twin eagles." It is important for us to notice these epithets, first, because they add description, and second, because we get confused about who is doing what if do not recognize the epithets as well as the names.

5. **Cataloguing.** The story uses catalogues of things and characters; there are many lists, both long and short. Just as the Old Testament has catalogues of genealogies--you remember all those begets--just so do ancient epics keep track of the lists of history. In one book of THE ILIAD, for example, there is a list of the ships that sailed from Greece to Troy.

6. **Long, formal speeches.** There are long and formal speeches by many characters. You will not have any trouble spotting these. Sometimes they happen in the heat of battle and other seemingly inappropriate times, but more often they occur at various kinds of meetings, as in an assembly of the chieftains.

7. **Divine Intervention.** Gods intervene in the affairs of human beings in these stories. For example, in Book I of THE ILIAD, Achilles, getting very angry at Agamemnon, starts to pull out his dagger to kill him. Suddenly, a goddess rushes to the side of Achilles (of course, no one else present can she her) to warn him not to be so hasty.

8. **Epic Digressions.** Epics frequently have epic digressions. These are passages that do not further the action of the story because they are asides or because they are repetitions. Remember that these recitations did not have TV replay shots. The audience had to remember a vast amount of material, so redundancy or reminding them of background material would have been helpful to them.

9. **Vast Settings.** The settings of these stories are vast. The known world was used, from the top of the -- mountains to the homes of the gods to whatever islands the culture knew of. The epic covers many nations, the world and also the universe. The stories use the epic simile. An epic simile is a long comparison of two things that are in different classes. They make vivid an image and describe or clarify. An example can be found in the long comparison of Paris Alexander, a Trojan prince, to a fine horse that has been manger fed a long time in a stable. When released to pasture, it races out with quick, sure strides, neck arched, knees high, mane flowing, proud it its beauty and strength ,to race to drink from a clear flowing stream. So Paris ran to battle.

10. **Heroes idealize the values of their civilizations.** The heroes embody the values of their civilization. The

physical strength and stamina of Achilles, for example, is made much of. The lifting of the latch of the door of his stockade requires the strength of three soldiers, but Achilles lifts it with one hand. His spear, thrown so lightly, is eighteen feet long. He is a power machine. Today, we all know, a tiny female can have more killing power than Achilles ever dreamed of.

11. **Grandiose/Elevated Language.** One of the things that make any epic hard to read is the fact that the poet typically uses very formal language and oftentimes extremely large words as part of the storytelling.

12. **Epic Battles.** Many epic poems contain within them lengthy descriptions of battles in which the hero participates.

13. **Epic Similes.** Epic similes are like regular similes but the comparison is just longer and more drawn out in explanation.

14. **Dire, Foreshadowing Warnings.** Many epic poems also contain warnings to the hero. It is an indication of the future events.

15. **Heroic Oath.** Many epic poems contain oaths from the hero, promising something that he will follow throughout.