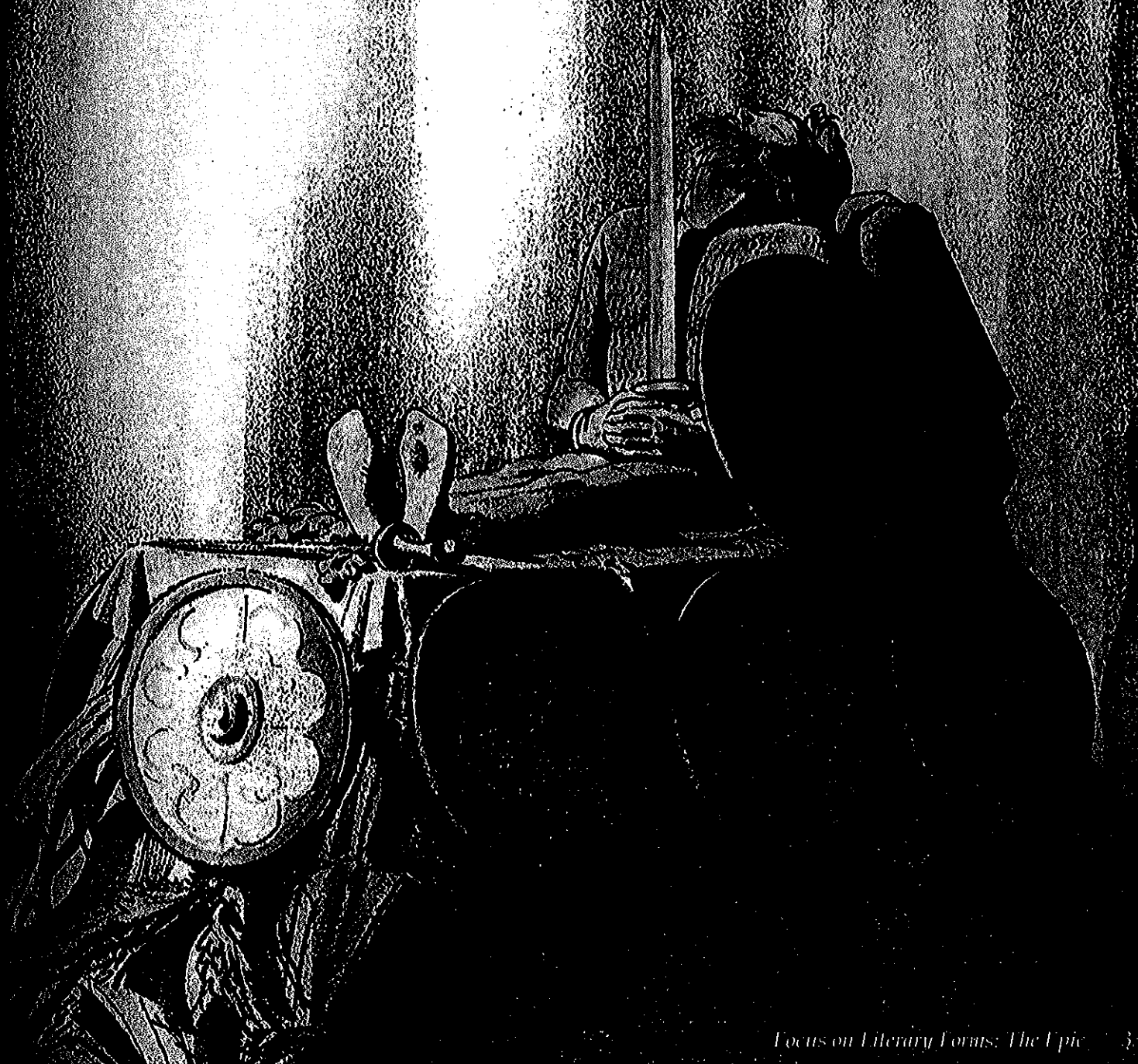


Unit 1  
Part  
2

## Focus on Literary Forms: The Epic



## Focus on Literary Forms

### Defining the Epic

One of the earliest forms of literature is the epic. An *epic* is a long narrative poem that recounts the adventures of a legendary hero in pursuit of a goal of national importance. The hero's accomplishments reflect the values of his culture and usually figure prominently in the history or mythology of his people.

... THE EPIC IMPARTS  
SOLEMNITY TO HISTORY. . . .

— Victor Hugo

### Elements of the Epic

Certain key elements set the epic narrative apart from other types of stories.

- **Epic hero:** The epic hero is the central character of an epic. This character is a larger-than-life figure, typically of noble or semidivine birth, who pits his courage, skill, and virtue against opposing, often evil, forces. In the early English epic *Beowulf*, for example, the hero Beowulf is a young warrior of high standing who battles a brutal and bloodthirsty monster.
- **Quest:** A quest is a long, dangerous journey or mission undertaken by the epic hero. The quest is the hero's opportunity to prove his heroism and win honor and undying renown. Beowulf embarks on a quest to aid a neighboring kingdom by defeating the hideous monster Grendel.
- **Valorous deeds:** These actions demonstrate the hero's courage, strength, or virtue and make up most of the action in the narrative. For example, Beowulf's superhuman strength is shown when he fights the savage Grendel with his bare hands—and wins!
- **Divine intervention:** In many epics, the hero receives help from a god or another supernatural force who takes an interest in his quest. In the ancient Greek epic the *Iliad*, for example, the goddess Athene helps the hero Achilles.
- **Great events:** Important events from the history or mythology of a nation or culture often provide the backdrop for the epic narrative. The *Iliad*, for example, takes place during the Trojan War, a war in which the Greeks invaded and conquered the city of Troy.

## Types of Epics

The epic genre is often divided into two categories.

### Folk Epics

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In ancient times, stories about heroes were recited or sung as entertainment and passed down orally from one generation to the next. These stories were eventually unified into *folk epics* and written down long after they were first composed. Examples of the folk epic include the following:

- **Beowulf** (Anglo-Saxon)
- **Mahabharata** (Indian)
- **Gilgamesh** (Sumerian)
- **Sundiata** (West African)

### Literary Epics

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*Literary epics* are written by individual authors, drawing on the style and conventions of the folk epic. Examples of literary epics include the following:

- **Iliad** and **Odyssey** by Homer
- **Divine Comedy** by Dante Alighieri
- **Aeneid** by Virgil
- **Paradise Lost** by John Milton

## Epic Conventions

Most epics share certain literary or formal characteristics called *epic conventions*.

- An epic opens by stating the subject or purpose, followed by an invocation of a muse (a spirit thought to inspire an artist) or supernatural force who would help to tell the story.
- The plot begins *in medias res*—Latin for “in the middle of things.” In other words, the reader joins the story in the thick of the action.
- Most epics are serious in tone and lofty in style, a technique meant to convey the importance of the events. Long speeches by the characters suggest an impressive formality, as do the lists (or catalogs) of battles, weapons, and royal gifts.

## Strategies for Reading Poetry

Use these strategies as you read an epic.

**Rereading the Action** The lists, or catalogs, in epics often interrupt the action to provide colorful descriptions of a character or a scene. After reading a list, reread the surrounding action before continuing. This strategy helps you follow the action in the epic.

**Picturing the Action and Situation** Epic poetry is filled with rich, descriptive language about exciting action. As you read these vivid descriptions, picture what is happening, visualizing each scene as if it were a scene in a movie. Forming a mental picture of what you are reading helps bring the epic to life.