

Epic, fiction and the novel

You are free draw from **Homer *Odyssey* Book 6** and **Virgil *Aeneid* Book 4** to think about the following questions.

1. Epic and fiction

(i) Are classical epics themselves *fictional* (a) from a modern perspective (b) from an ancient perspective?

Give evidence from ancient sources [cf Week 2 'Discussion' handout] if possible to support the answer to (b). If the answer to either (a) or (b) is 'no' how should epics be classified?

Do the particular cultural origins of Greek and Roman epics have a bearing on whether we should count them as fiction? ('Homer'/'Virgil' in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*)

(ii) Do epics *contain* fictional elements (a) from a modern perspective of fiction as a kind of literature (b) from an ancient perspective of fiction as fabrication/invention?

Again give evidence from modern ancient sources if possible to support your answer.

If the answer to either (a) or (b) is 'no', what do they consist of?

If the answer to answer to either (a) or (b) is yes, what kinds of features (e.g. from Homer, Virgil, Ovid) could be deemed fictional?

(iii) The Modernist poet and critic Ezra Pound defined epic as 'a poem including history'. How far does the historical content or supposed historical content of ancient epics such as the *Iliad*, *Aeneid*, Lucan's *Civil War* bear on these questions? How do ancient epic poets embellish or change history? What effect does this have?

(iv) Are some ancient epics more fictional than others? If so which ones and why?

(v) More generally how do you see the relation between epic and fiction working (a) in the modern world (b) in antiquity?

These short items of reading may not provide specific answers to the above questions but they will help stimulate some thoughts:

- 'Epic' in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*
- Paul Innes *Epic* London: Routledge 2012
- Denis Feeney *The Gods in Epic* Oxford: OUP 1991, chapter 1: 'The Critics'

2. Fantasy and the marvellous

What would you consider to be 'fantastic' and 'marvellous' episodes or elements in epic?

Provide some examples: are they instances of inherited myth or actual invention?

Do all ancient epics contain them? Are there ways of classifying or distinguishing between what is fictional, what is fantastic, and what is marvellous in epic?

Primary sources: Homer *Odyssey* 9-12; *Aeneid* Books 3, 6, 9; Ovid *Metamorphoses*

Secondary material: Tzvetan Todorov *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Cornell 1975); less 'useful' but interesting is Italo Calvino 'Odysseys within the Odyssey', in *The Literature Machine* (London 1987)

3 Epic and the novel

What distinguishes the ‘novel’ *in the strict sense* from fiction?

Do ancient epics have content in common with novels? What makes them different?

Do ancient epics have stylistic features in common with novels? What makes them different?

How far are ancient epics concerned with individual characters, their developments and thought processes?

It may help to consider specific examples of Homer and/or Virgil for the following questions:
Are some epics (or parts of epics) more like novels than others?

In what ways do you think epic may have influenced the development of the novel?

- E. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, (Princeton 1953): chapter 1 on Odysseus’ scar- dip into to other parts of this important book:
- M. Bakhtin, ‘Epic and novel’ in M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Texas 1981): a theoretical of the essential differences between epic and fiction)
- A. Laird, ‘Approaching characterisation’ in C. Martindale (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil* (Cambridge 1997)

Further Bibliography:

These studies are very accessible and enjoyable:

- E.M. Forster *Aspects of the Novel*
- D. Lodge *The Art of Fiction*

The following studies are more technical but help give a sharper picture of what novelistic narration involves – you may find them very useful for your essays.

- D. Cohn *Transparent Minds: Narrative modes for presenting Consciousness in fiction* Princeton 1984
- G. Leech and M. Short *Style in Fiction* London 1989