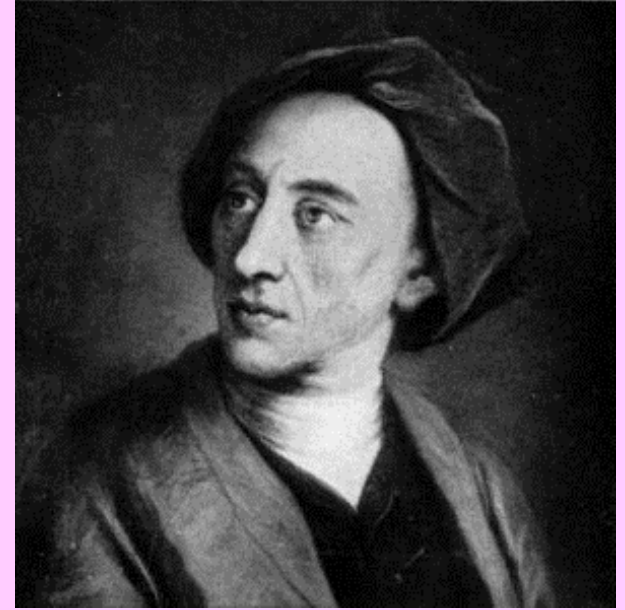'Come then, ye youths, and urge your generous toils
 Come strip the ancients and divide the spoils'

 Alexander Pope 1688 - 1744
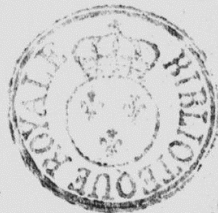
How to write a postmodern epic poem:

Students of Calliope; it's you he's talking to, and this is your task exactly. Take what you find interesting or inspiring from the ancient or classical epic poems and use those 'spoils' to adorn your own. 'Ye youths' are labouring over a body of raw material that includes Pope himself, Homer and Tennyson, the anonymous bards of Celtic and Arthurian epic verse. Stripping it of useful ingredients, discarding those that seem outdated or irrelevant.

Domus Profeß. Parif. Societ. Jesu.

TRAITÉ
DU
POËME
EPIQUE.

Par le R. P. LE BOSSU, *Chanoine*
Regulier de Sainte Geneviève.

Nouvelle Edition revûë & corrigée.

A PARIS,

Chez JEAN MUSIER, à la descente du
Pont-Neuf, au coin de la ruë de Nevers,
à l'Olivier.

M. DCCVIII.

AVEC PRIVILEGE DU ROY.

Ne extra hanc Bibliothecam efferatur. Ex obedientiâ.

Step One: Choose your story. It has to be the most incredible thing you've ever heard. But it also has to be credible. You could start by picking your personal hero/heroine and tell their tale. You could imagine that their epic story is being told a hundred or a thousand years in the future, to get the right effect. The idea is that you'll be teaching somebody, somewhere a lesson with your plot: there's a moral to this story.

These slides guides you through the six rules of Rene Le Bossu, a 17th Century French critic of Epic poetry, influenced by Aristotle. Epic poetry was having its heyday in Europe; but its demise followed soon after. What killed the epic poem? A new literary form; literally, the novel!

Epic Poetry Made Easy

<u>Le Bossu's Six Steps</u>

1.   FABLE

A moral tale - teaching through allegory

2.   ACTION

Aristotle's Unity - plot and episodes, with Catharsis

3.   FORM

Proposition - a statement of subject and characters

Invocation - to gods or muses

Narration – 'probable and marvellous'

4.   HEROES

Virtuous, noble, as nearly perfect as possible; but also real and consistent

5.   GODS

Celestial machinery, behind the scenes of human drama

Must have their own internal logic, may be embodiments of hero's personal qualities
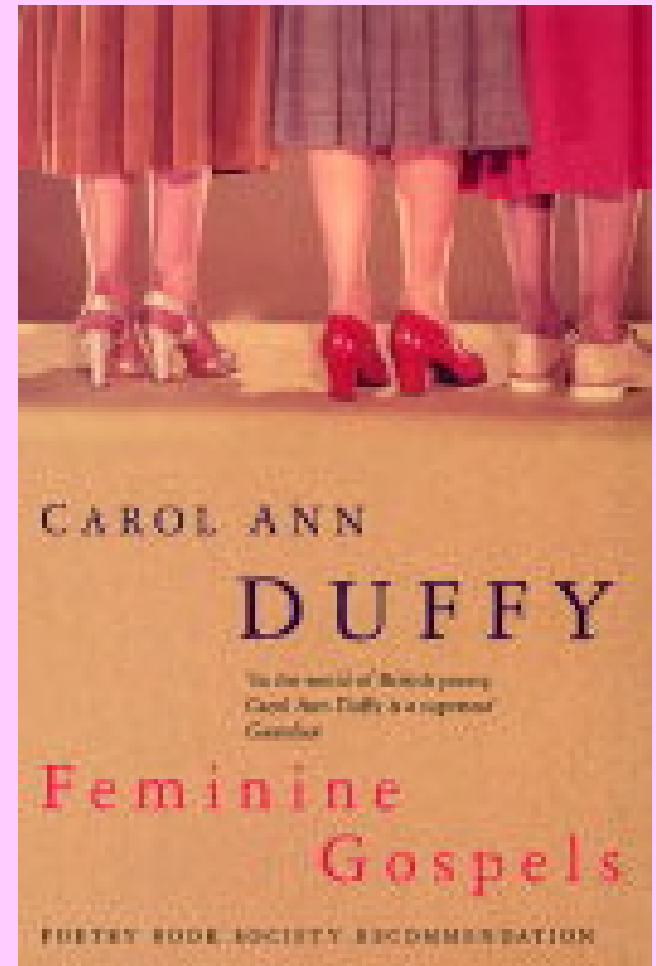
6.   EXPRESSION

Blank verse, with heroic couplets. Sublime rhetoric. A work of genius

Modern epic poem by first female laureate; 20 Pages long.
This is the beginning, one laugh while the teacher's back is turned;
by the end the whole establishment is brought down:

It was a girl in the Third Form, Carolann Clare,

Who, bored with the lesson, the rivers of England –

Brathay, Coquet, Crake, Dee, Don, Goyt,

Rothat, Tyne Swale, Tees, Wear, Wharfe…

Had passed a note, which has never been found,

To the classmate in front, Emily Jane, a girl

Who adored the teacher Miss V. Dunn MA,

Steadily squeaking her chalk on the board –

Allen, Clough, Duddon, Feugh, Greta, Hindburn,

Irwell, Kent Leven, Lowther, Lune, Sprint…

But who furtively opened the folded note,

Torn from the back of the King James Bible, read

What was scribbled there and laughed out loud.

CAROL ANN

DUFFY

The finest social of British poetry,
Carol Ann Duffy is a supreme
Comedian

Feminine

Gospels

POETRY BOOK SOCIETY RECOMMENDATION

Miss Nadimbaba was teaching the poems of Yeats

To the Fifth when the girls in the orchestra laughed. She held

In her hands the poem which had made her a scribbler of verse

At twelve or thirteen. 'The Song' – she was sick of the laughter

At Stafford Girls' High – 'of Wandering Aengus.' She stared

At the girls in her class who were starting to shake. An epidemic,

That's want it was. It had gone on all term. It was now the air

That they breathed, teachers and girls: a giggling, sniggering,

Gurgling, snickering atmosphere, a laughing gas that seeped

under doors, up corridors, into the gym, the chemistry lab,

The swimming pool, into Latin and Spanish and French and Greek,

Into Needlework, History, Art, R.K., P.E into cross-country runs

Into the silver apples of the moon, the golden apples of the sun.

Feel the rhythm; this is hexameter, the meter used by Homer in the Odyssey. Dactyls: 'di di dum di di dum di di dum di di dum': 'she was sick of the laughter at Stafford Girls' High'.
All the girls' names have a dum di di dum rhythm (Rosemary Beth, Geraldine Ruth, Carol-Ann Clare; her?)

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Step Two; The Oldest writing lesson in the world; start at the beginning, steer straight through middle, and end at the ending. Take the reader on a moving journey, etc.

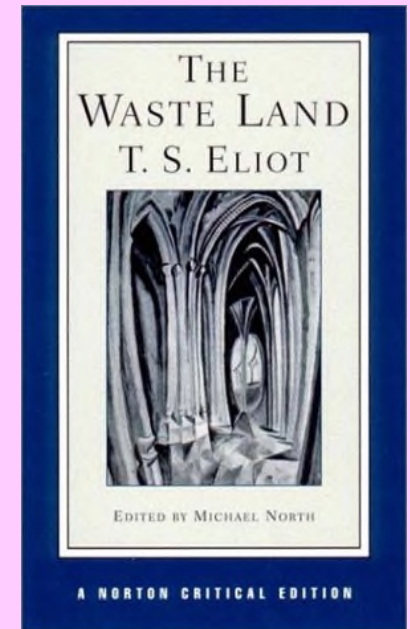The modern muse doesn't make you obey these rules, by the way. From Chekov's Three Sisters on, characters in stories don't have to go where they say they will, eg. Moscow.

Merlin is here to introduce Arthurian myth; for Tennyson's Morte d'Arthur represents the peak of English Epic poetry, just at the point that it dies:

Then saw they how there hove a dusky barge,

Dark as a funeral scarf from stem to stern,

Beneath them; and descending they were ware

That all the decks were dense with stately forms

Black-stoled, black-hooded, like a dream—by these

Three Queens with crowns of gold—and from them rose

A cry that shiver'd to the tingling stars,

And, as it were one voice, an agony

Of lamentation, like a wind, that shrills

All night in a <u>waste land</u>, where no one comes,

Or hath come, since the making of the world.

Morte d'Arthur – 1830

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

THE WASTE LAND
T. S. ELIOT

EDITED BY MICHAEL NORTH

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

The Wasteland – 1922   T.S. Eliot

I have seen with my own eyes the Sibyl hanging in a jar, and when the boys asked her "What do you want?" She answered, "I want to die."

Tennyson's Morte d'Arthur – 1830. And, hidden inside it, in line 201 of the poem, the title of T. S. Eliot's epitome of the modern epic poem. Again with the end of an era, dying of the old order: and the whole point of these poems once was to preserve it all, as lists of great men and deeds. Even the sibyl, wise woman and seer has seen it all before and had enough. Eliot's epigraph says the classic epic is over.

As a new writer, ask yourself what could come next, then; start of a new tradition? Six new rules?
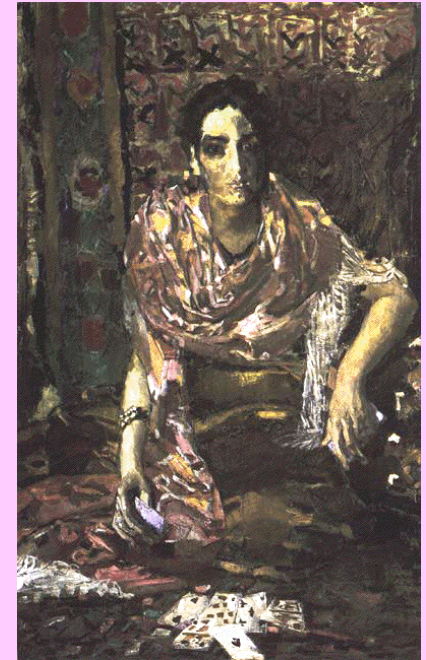
Madame Sosotris, famous clairvoyante

Had a bad cold, nevertheless

Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,

With a wicked pack of cards. Here, said she,

Is your card, the drowned Phoenician Sailor,

(Those are pearls that were his eyes. Look!)

…

And here is the one-eyed merchant, and this card,

Which is blank, is something he carries on his back,

Which I am forbidden to see. I do not find

The Hanged Man. …

Thankyou. If you see dear Mrs. Equitone

Tell her I bring the horoscope myself:

One must be so careful these days.

No beginning, middle and end in the right order, for Elliot; the episodes seem unconnected and it lacks a plot.

No consistent narrative voice, from this epic rule breaker. His has multiple voices: sub-titled 'He do the policeman in different voices' from Dickens.

Unreal City,

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,

I had not thought death had undone so many.

Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,

And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

Flowed up the hill and down King William Street,

To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours

With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.

There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying 'Stetson!

'You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!

'That corpse you planted last year in your garden,

'Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?

'Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?

'Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,

'Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!

'You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!'

www.histoire-fr.com

Here's the thing: sometimes the beat is iambic pentameter, rhythmic and rigid as you like ('To where Saint Mary Woolnoth kept the hours'). In other lines it goes off-beat, ('With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine.') Free verse; the rhythm fits the story rather than carrying on regardless, as it did it in epic poetry before.

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Virtuous, noble, as nearly perfect as possible;

but also real and consistent

Calliope says: steps 3 and 4. Plot 'n' Characters – still the same old stories.

This is how the epic philosophers got their ideas; and they weren't afraid to admit it! That top tip from Aristotle for telling a tale credible but incredible: 'The poet should prefer probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities when creating the marvellous.' I think it means this: use a magic wand rather than spontaneous combustion to send your villain up in a puff of smoke.

The Cautious Gunslinger

Of impeccable personal smoothness

And slender leather encased hands

Folded casually…

As the Queen of Hearts burns

From his gauntlet into my eyes.

Ed Dorn An Idle Visitation 1968

I held the reins of his horse

While he went off into the desert

To pee. *Yes,* he reflected

When he returned, that's better.

How long, he asked

Have you been in this territory.

Years I said. Years.

Aristotle's idea of 'Decorum'; heroes had to be men, for a start. They didn't go pee-pee in the bushes, in the middle of a verse…

Epic Poetry Made Easy

Calliope says; traditionally it was not allowed to mix pagan and Christian gods, in an epic poem. But the postmodern version could invite them all from Allah to Zeus to a banquet, sitting Ganesh and Gilgamesh side by side at the feast. Milton's Paradise Lost seems old school, but by invoking the Muses to sing of the fall of Lucifer, he's mixing it up too.

The idea of gods working behind the scenes of human drama was key to the classic epic; but what about now? In todays world, what is the backstage area? Who lives and rules there?
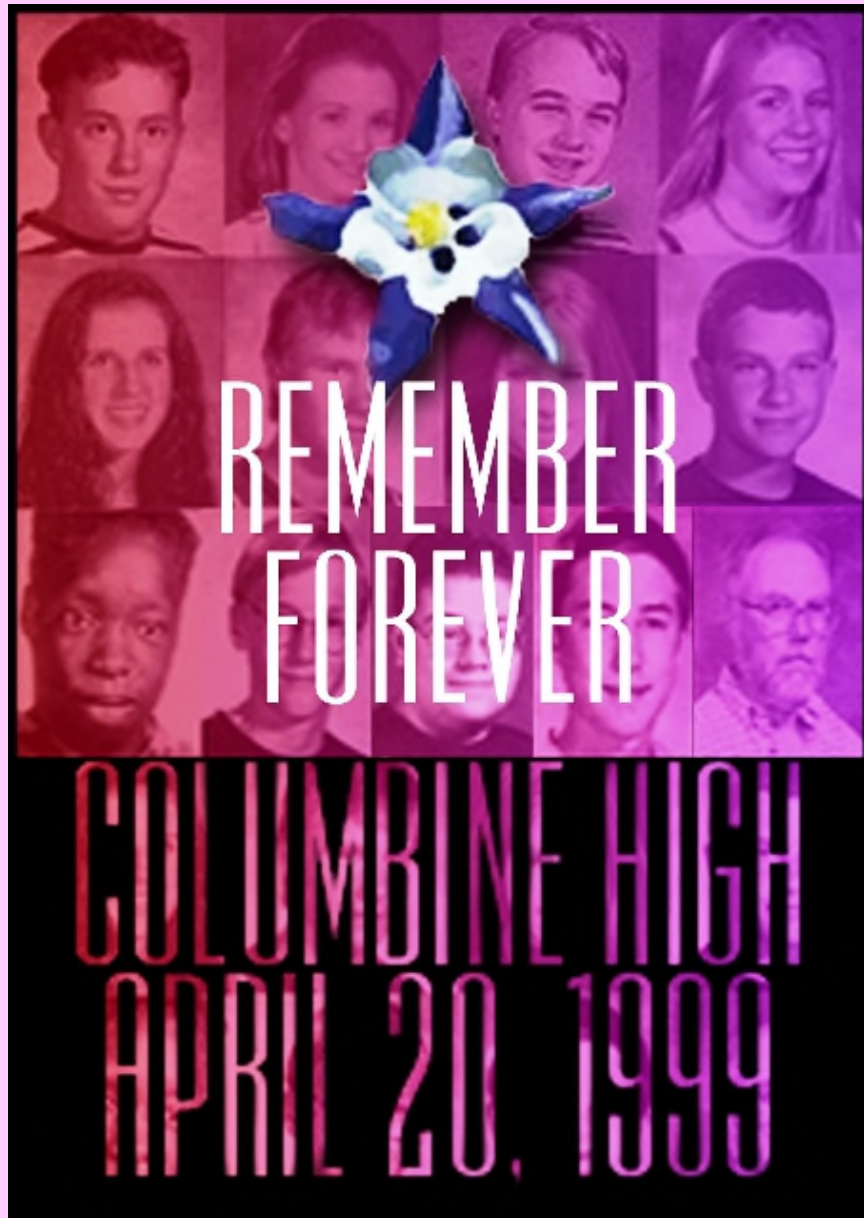
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REMEMBER
FOREVER

COLUMBINE HIGH
APRIL 20, 1999

This is to set the scene for 'Killing Time': best PoMo epic poem! The Columbine tragedy, in 1999, was the first High School shooting of its kind. Simon Armitage swaps bombs for buds and bullets for blooms in his brilliant piece. The half-rhymes (eg. buddleia and suburbia) are particularly postmodern, here.

Asking yourself the question 'what's the worst thing that could happen?' is a good way to get an epic poem going…. (Also ask yourself 'what is the best thing that could happen; because they've got to be awesome as well as awful.)

And even though many believe that flowers should be kept

In expert hands

Only, or left to specialists in the field such as florists,

The law of the land

Dictates that God, guts and gardening made the country

What it is today

And for as long as the flower industry can see to it

Things are staying that way.

What they reckon is this: deny a person the right to carry

Flowers of his own

And he's liable to wind up on the business end of a flower

Somebody else has grown.

As for the two boys, it's back to the same old debate:

Its is something in the mind

That grows from birth, like a seed, or is it society

Makes a person that kind?

This is the end: see it all at

I fancy a final twist of his excellent trope: like people come to lay flowers at the scene of mass shootings, Armitage could have shown them laying down their guns and grenades, at the school gates, instead…

'Stripping the Ancients'

Calliope's Shopping List: Epic Ingredients for that Postmodern Poem

The Wasteland – T.S. Eliot (Elitist)

Mysticism; the Tarot,   Mythology; Mylae

Gunslinger – Ed Dorn (Eclectic)

 Mysticism; the Queen of Hearts, Mythology; Howard Hughes

The Laughter of Stafford Girls High – Carol Ann Duffy

Lists, languages, literary references; Greek 'Hexameter' with Dactyls

Killing Time – Simon Armitage (Excellent)

Grand metaphor, moral tone, tragic outcome; Iambic rhythm

"Verse and rhyme are only the clothes of the body poetic, sentiments and actions are the members of the body, and invention and disposition are the soul."

Calliope concludes: the epic idea comes first, followed by the plot, and finished with a literary polish. Class is over now, at the Academy of Athens; where the story of Socrates was the philosophy of Plato, seen here in dialogue with his student Aristotle.