EPICS AND THEIR CHARACTERISTICS

A long narrative poem that tells of the adventures of a hero who embodies the values of his/her civilization. The adventures will be told in episodes important to the history of a nation or race.

Examples: the Odyssey, the Iliad, Beowulf, Gilgamesh

Standard Conventions
1. Main character is a physically impressive hero of national or international importance and of great historical or legendary significance.
2. The setting is vast in scope, covering great nations, the world, or the universe.
3. The action consists of deeds of great valor or requiring superhuman courage.
4. Supernatural forces (gods, angels, demons) take interest in the action of the story.
5. The poet uses a style of sustained elevation.
6. The poet retains a measure of objectivity.

Common Devices Employed by Epic Poets
7. The work begins in medias res (in the middle of things), and much of the necessary exposition is not given until later.
8. The poem opens by invoking a muse.
9. The poet includes catalogs of warriors, ships, and armies.
10. Main characters give extended, formal speeches.
11. The poet makes frequent use of the epic simile.

The central protagonist of an epic who embodies the important morals, values, and virtues of the society of which he is a product

Examples: Achilles in the Iliad, Beowulf in Beowulf

Characteristics of the Epic Hero

- A larger-than-life person who embodies the highest ideals of his culture
- Clever and wise, but capable of error
- Superior in degree to other men and to his environment
- Overcomes great obstacles/opponents but maintains his humanity
- Especially skilled both with and without weapons
- Undertakes a quest/journey to achieve something of great value to himself or society
- Ordinary laws of nature are sometimes suspended for the epic hero.
- Not a superhuman with magical powers but a regular human whose aspirations and accomplishments set him apart
- Experiences typical human emotions, yet is able to master and control these human traits to a greater degree than a typical person
- Lives on after death, meaning he is forever remembered by those who live after him, achieving a type of immortality. As such, the epic hero strives for honor and fame.

LITERARY TERMS

A traditional story, usually concerning some superhuman being or unlikely event, that was once widely believed to be true. In most cases, myths present supernatural episodes as a means of interpreting natural events.

Examples: The myth of Hades, Persephone, and Demeter to explain seasons
A descriptive label/phrase (adjective) applied to a person or thing that emphasizes a particular quality or attribute of the person/thing being described; often repeated throughout the text

**Six Types of Epithets**

1. **Origin/home**: tells the birthplace or kingdom of the character
2. **Patronymic**: gives the lineage (father) of the character
3. **Appearance/state**: gives a physical description/trait of the character
4. **Skill/art**: refers to a noteworthy attribute
5. **Position**: identifies the character’s position in his/her society
6. **Heroic quality/general**: identifies epic or cultural ideal or innate qualities

**Examples:**

Odysseus is often referred to as “the man of twists and turns” or “long-suffering Odysseus”

**Epic (Homeric) Simile**

An elaborate simile (more involved/ornate than an ordinary simile) that usually goes on for a number of lines; often compares heroic/epic events to understandable, everyday things

**Example:**

“She brushed [the arrow] away from his skin as lightly as when a mother / Brushes a fly away from her child who is lying in sweet sleep.”

**Narrative Drift/Digressions**

An interruption in the narration to elaborate on an aspect of something that is being talked about

**Example:**

If Homer mentions a gift of wine, he may digress and describe both the history of the gift and the history of the giver.

**Cataloging**

The listing of ships, warriors, gods, etc.

**GREEK CONCEPTS**

**Shame Culture**

Self image is generated by what other people say/perceive of that person

**Nostos**

Greek word meaning “song of return” or “homecoming song”

**Kleos**

Greek word meaning “song of glory”

**Xenia**

Greek word for “hospitality;” refers to the importance of hospitality in Greek culture and the expectation of that a host show generosity and courtesy to those who are far from home.

**Moira**

Greek word meaning “share of life”

**Aristeia**

soldier’s highest moment of glory in war, when he fights so bravely and single-mindedly as to experience no fear and to appear nearly invincible

**Timê**

Greek word for “honor;” most basic tangible, physical expression of *timê* is *geras*

**Geras**

The booty, gifts, or particular prize collected by a warrior

**Mênis**

Greek word for “anger, rage, wrath”

**Important Notes Regarding the Quoting and Citation of Epic Poetry**

- Indicate line divisions with a backslash (i.e. “Roses are red / Violets are blue”).
- The *Iliad* has a specific MLA citation format, which is the abbreviation for the *Iliad* (*Il.*) followed by the book and line number(s) separated by periods. **Example:** (*Il.* 5.299-301)