The Epic Poem

&

The Epic Hero
Epic Definition

An epic is a long narrative poem that relates the great deeds of a larger-than-life hero who embodies the values of a particular society.
Epics often...

✓ Concern eternal human problems such as the conflict between **GOOD and EVIL**

✓ Written or told on a **grand scale** and often in **ceremonial style**
Two Types of Epics

1. **Folk Epic** - *oral* compositions passed on from storyteller to storyteller and has *changed* over time.  
   Ex. – *Gilgamesh*, *Beowulf*, *the Iliad*, and the *Odyssey*

2. **Literary Epic** - *written* compositions that are *unchanged* over time.  
   Ex. - *Aeneid* and *Paradise Lost*
Epic Characteristics

There are five main epic characteristics.
Epic Characteristic

#1

✓ The hero is a great leader who is identified strongly with a particular people or society.
The setting is broad and often includes supernatural realms, especially the land of the dead.
Epic Characteristic
#3

✓ The hero does great deeds in battle or undertakes an extraordinary journey or quest.
Epic Characteristic #4

✓ Sometimes **gods or other supernatural or fantastic beings take part in the action.**
Epic Characteristic

#5

 ✓ The story is **told in heightened language**
Some other epic characteristics called...

EPIC CONVENTIONS - Shared characteristics of epics writers drew upon to establish the epic quality of their poems.
EPIC CONVENTION

#1

✓ There is an **INVOCATION** or formal plea for aid/help.

✓ This plea is usually to a deity or some other spiritual power.
EPIC CONVENTION
#2
✓ The action begins
IN MEDIA RES...
✓ literally meaning
“in the middle of things”
The epic begins *in media res* and then *flashes back* to events that took place before the narrator’s current time setting.
Epic Similes (a.k.a. Homeric simile) - elaborately extended comparisons relating heroic events to simple, everyday events using like, as, so, and just as.
EPIC CONVENTIONS

#5

✓ Epithet: a descriptive phrase that presents a particular trait of a person or thing. It can be a quick aid to characterization.

✓ Ex: Odysseus is a “raider of cities.”

✓ Odysseus is “a man skilled in all ways of contending.”
The Epic Hero
Epic Hero
Characteristics
✓ The epic hero is a “LARGER THAN LIFE PERSON” who embodies the highest ideals of his culture
Real Example:

✓ In “Gilgamesh”, the epic hero Gilgamesh is considered **“larger-than-life”**

✓ and embodies **LOYALTY, VALOR/COURAGE, SENSE OF JUSTICE, DIGNITY, PERSISTENCE**, and many other traits of his culture and time period.
Epic Hero
Characteristics

✔ The epic hero usually undertakes a
QUEST/JOURNEY
to achieve something of great value to themselves or society
Epic Hero Characteristics

✓ Epic heroes

“LIVE ON AFTER DEATH”…

✓ meaning they are forever remembered by those who live after them…

✓ achieving a type of **immortality**
Epic Hero

Characteristics

✓ Not a "Superman" with magical powers, but a "REGULAR" human (sometimes part god/part human) whose aspirations and accomplishments set him/her apart
Epic Hero
Characteristics

✓ Overcomes great obstacles/opponents but maintains HUMANITY
Epic Hero
Characteristics

✓ Epic hero *experiences typical* HUMAN EMOTIONS/FEELINGS, yet is able to master and control these human traits to a greater degree than a typical person.
Epic Hero

Characteristics

✓ It is often necessary for the epic hero to **connect/make contact with “LESSER” humans** in order to succeed
THE HERO’S JOURNEY ARCHETYPE

✓ What do Star Wars, Harry Potter, “Gilgamesh” and Homer’s The Odyssey all have in common?
All have heroes

✓ ... that partake in a journey of significant change, that is, the “hero’s journey.”

✓ All stories have heroes that are truly profound for exploring the archetype of the hero in literature and in our own lives.