Heroes and Quests: Intro To the Epic Poem, Homer and The Odyssey

Essential Question: What elements are important in understanding and analyzing an epic poem?
What is an epic poem?

• A long, serious, poetic, narrative poem
• Recounts the adventures of the epic hero
• Before writing, epic poems were memorized and helped keep record of the great deeds and history of a culture
• Examples: Gilgamesh, The Odyssey, Beowulf
The Epic Hero

• Possesses superhuman strength, craftiness, and confidence
• Helped or harmed by gods or fate
• Embodies qualities valued by the culture
• Overcomes perilous situations
• Has extraordinary abilities but also human frailties
• Examples: Odysseus, King Arthur, Harry Potter
The Epic Plot

• Depicts a long, strange journey filled with such complications as:
  • Strange creatures
  • Treacherous weather
  • Divine intervention - Gods/goddesses often intercede on behalf of the hero
  • Large-scale events
  • Other supernatural challenges

• Centers around the epic hero
• Has an outcome that greatly affects the destiny of a nation or group of people
Epic Setting

- Includes fantastic or exotic lands
- Involves more than one nation or culture
- The action spans not only geographical but also often cosmological space: across land, sea, into the underworld, or thru space or time etc.
Archetypes

- Characters and situations recognizable across times and cultures
  - Brave hero
  - Sea monster
  - Suitor’s contest
  - Evil temptress
  - Loyal servant
  - Buried treasure
Epic themes:

- Reflect universal concerns, such as:
  - Courage
  - Loyalty
  - Beauty
  - The fate of a nation
  - Life and death
  - A homecoming
- Expect more than one theme to be developed in an epic
Other “Epic” Elements:

• Similes: an epic simile is more elaborate than in a short poem. It does more than make a comparison, it conveys an idea about what is being described.

• Epithets: renames a person or thing with a descriptive phrase, often used to correctly complete the rhythm or meter in a line of poetry. (Ex: Odysseus= “son of laertes” or “raider of cities.”)

• Allusion: Reference to a literary or historical person, place, event, or composition. (Ex: ”This is the way the court of Zeus must be”)
Other “Epic” Elements:

• Alliteration: alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds throughout a phrase or sentence and usually at the beginning of each word. (Ex: “Sailing the seven seas”)

• Rhyme: Pretty sure I don’t need to explain this one (Ex: “Night of fright”).

• Imagery: Using sensory words (any words that describe how something sounds, looks, feels, smells, and tastes) to evoke an image (Ex: “The sea exploded into the rocky shore”)
The Trojan War

• Conflict between Greece (Achaea) and Troy - 1200 BC
• A Trojan prince kidnapped Helen of Troy, wife to the King of Sparta.
• Sparta recruited armies of surrounding kingdom to attack Troy to reclaim his wife. The Greek forces held Troy under siege for 10 years but could not break its walls.
• Until Odysseus, King of Ithaca came up with the Trojan Horse plan.
• The Greeks hid in a wooden horse outside the gates of Troy. When the Trojans brought it into their gates, the Greeks attacked, ending the war.
Homer’s *The Odyssey*

- Homer lived sometime between 900 and 800 BC but many historians argue whether he ever lived at all.
- Homer is credited for writing *The Odyssey*.
- *The Odyssey* is often the greatest Epic Poem of all time.
- *The Odyssey* takes place somewhere around the Mediterranean Sea. The Trojan War was said to take place in the regions of modern day Greece and Turkey.
- *The Odyssey* recalls the long and difficult journey that the king Odysseus took home following the Trojan War.