

What is an epic?

An epic is a narrative—usually a long poem—which focuses on a hero and his / her adventurous quest. One example, from ancient times, is The Odyssey.

Homer was a great writer of ancient Greek epics. He made Ulysses (Odysseus)—his epic hero (the main protagonist of the story) in *The Odyssey*—a human being (not a god or a demi-god) who possesses outstanding characteristics.

Ulysses (Odysseus)—whose efforts to reach home, after the Trojan War, took a decade—had to endure all kinds of temptations (like the Sirens) and really awful situations which he had to resist. Odysseus often had assistance, however—from a guide like Circe—to help him survive one crisis after another.

Ulysses' character traits are not just personally admirable, they also serve as an example to others. What are some of the characteristics of an epic hero?

- Excels not just in skills but also in strength, courage and loyalty
- Is willing to embark on a difficult quest in order to achieve an important goal
- Succeeds in war (and also adventure) despite being tested over and over and over again
- Values both honor and glory while undertaking noble causes
- Usually has a guide (like Virgil, in Dante's "Divine Comedy")
- Meets and battles monsters and demons (defending those who cannot defend themselves)
- Tries to resist the temptations of individuals who are not what they seem
- Is generous to (and on behalf of) followers but is merciless to enemies
- Takes action whenever needed (because he/she is braver and stronger than others)
- Willingly undertakes challenges (but sometimes creates avoidable problems)
- Is sometimes rash (leading to unnecessary risks)
- Descends into dark places (often the underworld in ancient epics)
- Attains the goal (even after reaching really low points or nearly giving up)

- Is often transformed, into a better person, by the end of the quest

Applying these characteristics to Beowulf, Britain's national epic, we can conclude—without question—that Beowulf, the man, is an epic hero.

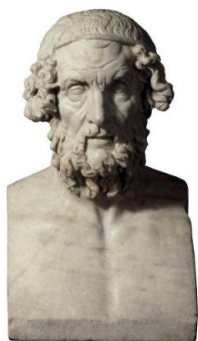
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Media Stream



Homer - Ancient Poet

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Ulysses - Hero of Homer's Odyssey

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