# The Epic

One of the earliest forms of literature is the epic. An epic is a long narrative poem that recounts the adventures of a legendary hero in pursuit of a goal of national importance. The hero’s accomplishments reflect the values of his culture and usually figure prominently in the history or mythology of his people.

# Types of Epics

The epic genre is often divided into two categories.

* **Folk Epics**: In ancient times, stories about heroes were recited or sung as entertainment and passed down orally from one generation to the next. These stories were eventually unified into folk epics and written down long after they were first composed.
* **Literary Epics**: Literary epics are written by individual authors, drawing on the style and conventions of the folk epic.

# Elements of the Epic

Certain key elements set the epic narrative apart from other types of stories.

* **Epic hero:** The epic hero is the central character of an epic. This character is a larger-than-life figure, typically of noble or semi-divine birth, who pits his courage, skill, and virtue against opposing, often evil, forces. In the early English epic *Beowulf*, for example, the hero Beowulf is a young warrior of high standing who battles brutal and bloodthirsty monsters.
* **Quest:** A quest is a long, dangerous journey or mission undertaken by the epic hero. The quest is the hero’s opportunity to prove his heroism and win honor and undying renown. Beowulf embarks on a quest to aid a neighboring kingdom by defeating the hideous monster Grendel.
* **Valorous deeds:** These actions demonstrate the hero’s courage, strength, or virtue and make up most of the action in the narrative. For example, Beowulf’s superhuman strength is shown when he fights the savage Grendel with his bare hands-and wins!
* **Divine intervention:** In many epics, the hero receives help from a god or another supernatural force who takes an interest in his quest. In the ancient Greek epic the *Iliad*, for example, the goddess Athene helps the hero Achilleus.
* **Great events:** Important events from history or mythology of a nation or culture often provide the backdrop for the epic narrative. The *Iliad*, for example, takes place during the Trojan War, a war in which the Greeks invaded and conquered the city of Troy.

# Epic Conventions

Most epics share certain literary or formal characteristics called epic conventions (or rules).

1. An epic opens by stating the subject or purpose, followed by an invocation of a muse (a spirit thought to inspire an artist) or supernatural force whom would help to tell the story.
2. The plot begins in *medias res* – Latin for “in the middle of things.” In other words, the reader joins the story in the thick of the action.
3. Most epics are serious in tone and lofty in style, a technique meant to convey the importance of events. Long speeches by the characters suggest an impressive formality, as do the lists (or catalogs) of battles, weapons and royal gifts.

**Literary Terms To Know:**

**Epic Poem** – A long narrative poem that recounts the adventures of a legendary hero in pursuit of a goal of national importance.

**Epic Hero** – The central character of an epic.

**Narrative** - A narrated account; a story.

**Canto** - A principal form of division in a [long poem](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Long_poem), especially the [epic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epic_poetry).

**Stanza** - Consists of a grouping of [lines](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Line_%28poetry%29), set off by a space, that usually has a set pattern of [meter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meter_%28poetry%29) and rhyme.

**Alliteration** - the occurrence in a phrase or line of poetry of two or more words having the same initial sound.

Example

Example from Beowulf

**Personification** – A representation of a thing or object as human or having human qualities.

Example

Example from Beowulf

**Kenning** – A literary device in which a poetic phrase substitutes for a noun. They were used as metaphorical descriptions.

Example

Example from Beowulf

# Historical Terms To Know:

# Write their definitions in the space provided

**Thane** – A warrior who follows his king and is sometimes rewarded for his bravery with land

**Scop** - A tribal poet who celebrated cultural values by singing epics on occasions of great ceremony and festivity

**Comitatus** - A gathering of warriors under one governing lord, representing a strategic interweaving of family threads so as simultaneously to enlarge and secure tribal identity and allegiance

**Vaunt -** To speak boastfully of; brag about. Speech of extravagant self-praise.