Writing an Epic Poem

An epic poem is one that tells the story of a hero and his exploits. There are several different kinds of epics – some celebrate one grand adventure, while some span the life of a hero. In Beowulf, the entire life of the epic hero is related through the telling of three fantastic battles. By the end, when our hero dies, we feel he has led a worthy life and fulfilled his fate or destiny. However, there are also tragic heroes, who for whatever reason are unable to fulfill their destinies, and who die or who suffer a tragic transformation by the end of the poem. One thing is certain: an epic is a long journey, consists of many episodes, and traces the development of the hero and all that help or hinder him. Through the course of the epic the hero will change, grow, and die. It is only in death that we will ever come to an understanding of whether this hero’s deeds were good, and goals achieved. If so, then the hero is celebrated. If not, then the tragic hero is mourned not for the loss of his life, but for the failure of the quest.

There are all kinds of heroes, in all walks of life. Heroes can be fictional and super-heroic; they can also be real-life people who just stand out by fulfilling a dream, or enabling others to fulfill a dream. Real-life heroes can also be tragic, suffering some great downfall to serve as an example to us all of what not to be.

Your assignment is to write an epic poem. This poem should tell the story of a hero. At its minimum, your story should fulfill the five basic elements of plot: 1) it should have an exposition that introduces the setting, characters, and conflict; 2) the rising action should develop the conflict, creating more tension; 3) the climax is the turning point of the story, where the hero either overcomes the conflict on the path to fulfilling his or her destiny, or succumbs to the conflict and creates tragedy; 4) the falling action should resolve any issues or subplots created in the rising action, and return the hero to home; and 5) the resolution should directly address the main conflict. It should also be divided into three basic episodic sections, aligned with the hero’s journey: 1) the departure, 2) the journey, and 3) the return. Depending on the length of your poem, there may be any number of sub-sections or episodes.

As we discussed when we began reading Beowulf, the epic poem usually follows the formula of the “hero’s journey.” Read the steps of the hero’s journey on the handout I provided, and try to incorporate them into the plot of your epic poem. Keep in mind that the steps of the journey can be both physical and psychological, and both literal and figurative. A battle can be a literal hand-to-hand conflict, or a psychological dilemma with the self.

A note about poetry: it is what it is. Poetry is subjective. You can give it rhyme, rhythm, and meter. It can be free-verse in its truest sense. It’s up to you. Some people revel in the challenge of constructing verse in heroic couplet, utilizing a regular A/A/B/B rhyme scheme incorporated with iambic pentameter. Some people would rather just tell the story. It’s up to you to decide which person you are. Either style is perfectly acceptable.

As for length, this poem should tell a story. If the poem were single spaced, I would expect it would be at least two pages to tell a complete story. Don’t be afraid to write something much longer.

Due Monday, April 11
Not sure how to do this??? Consider this formula (each bullet could be a line, or could be a stanza, up to you!!):

Part One: Exposition
- Explain when this story originates
- Explain where this story originates
- State the name of the hero, (and maybe where he originates from)
- Describe the hero physically

Part Two: Character Development, and the challenge
- What great things has this hero done? Consider:
  - Physical challenges
  - Political Challenges
  - Psychological Challenges
- What great threat does the hero face? Is it a challenge directly to the hero, or is he/she defending someone or something else?
- Does the hero have a weakness?

Part Three: The Enemy
- Who or what is the antagonist? Develop the antagonist as you did the hero:
  - Origin
  - Physical traits
  - Upbringing and goals or aspirations

Part Four: The Rising Action
- Develop the problem, explain why the task is progressively more challenging.
- Does the antagonist directly or indirectly challenge the hero?
- How does the hero become more invested in the challenge? Threat to life? Legacy? Family? The world?
- How does the tension build towards the final challenge between the hero and the antagonist?

Part Five: The Climax and Falling Action
- How does the hero become fully prepared for this challenge?
- What is the nature of the challenge? What role does the hero’s weakness play?
- What is the weakness of the antagonist?
- Who wins this final challenge and why?
- What are the implications for others? How does this affect the hero’s family, friends, and community?

Part Six: The Resolution
- Consider Part two again: how has that challenge been resolved?
- What is the legacy the hero leaves behind?
- Does anyone die? If so, is it a happy death, the end of a life of fulfillment, or are issues left unresolved?
- Potential for a new challenge