The Epic Hero and The Hero’s Journey

Adapted from Kristen Grandfield’s “Teaching the Epic of Gilgamesh”

http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/2007/2/07.02.01.x.html#f

The National Endowment for the Humanities Education Site describes the epic hero cycle as having the following elements: an extraordinary hero who is charged with a journey or quest. The quest itself has obstacles that force the hero to prove himself. In some cases mystical or supernatural beings are for or against the hero and may even lead that hero into the supernatural world, where other humans have never been. Like the tragic hero, the epic hero reaches a low point but rather than die, like the tragic hero, the epic hero resurrects himself and the epic comes to its resolution.

Translated from twelve stone tablets, Gilgamesh details Uruk's king, Gilgamesh and his obstacles, relationships, use (and potential misuse) of power, and his learning that he needs more than strength to be successful.

Characteristics of the archetypal or epic hero

1 Unusual circumstances of birth; sometimes in danger or born into royalty

2 An event, sometimes traumatic, leads to adventure or quest

3 Hero has supernatural help

4 The Hero must prove himself many times while on adventure

5 When the hero dies, he is rewarded spiritually

Elements of the epic cycle

The journey is the key element of the epic and the epic cycle.

1 The hero must possess supernatural abilities or powers. These can often be magnified qualities we all possess (for example, strength we all possess but the hero's is superhuman).

2 The hero is charged with a quest that will test his abilities. This will test his worthiness to be a leader.

3 Then the hero encounters helpers and companions as well as mythical animals or creatures during his journey.

4 The travels of the hero will take him to a supernatural world that ordinary humans are barred.

5 The cycle reaches a low point when we think the hero has been defeated but in the end, the hero resurrects himself and regains his rightful place.

In the book *How to Read Literature like a Professor* Thomas Foster gives five elements of the journey that readers can analyze. The five elements are :

1 the quester himself,

2 a place to go,

3 a stated reason to go there,

4 challenges or trials en route during the journey,

5 the real reason a quester goes on the journey

Many questers set out to kill a beast or do something heroic to continue their reign as king or as someone of high esteem. However, after the journey is over, there is a message or lesson the quester must learn. This absolutely becomes the real reason the quester must take the journey and becomes something universal readers can learn from. (Foster, Thomas How to Read Literature Like A Professor. New York: HarperCollins, 2003)