***Connections Literature***

**Defining the Epic**

An **epic** is a long narrative poem about a larger-than-life hero who is engaged in a dangerous journey, or quest, that is important to the history of a nation or people.

The epic is not merely a genre, but a way of life.

—Harry Levin

**Types of Epic**

There are two main types of epic—the folk epic, created and developed through the oral tradition, and the literary epic, a story attributed to a single identified author.

* **Folk epics**are stories about heroes that were originally recited or sung as entertainment at feasts. Over the generations, these stories were passed down orally from storyteller to storyteller until eventually they were written down.
* **Literary epics**were written by a specific author, usually borrowing the style and characteristics of the folk epic. Some literary epics draw upon well-known stories, characters, and myths that were passed down through the oral tradition. For example, Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Valmiki’s *Ramayana* are often classified as folk epics, although ultimately they were attributed to these authors

The chart shows examples of folk epics and literary epics in world literature.

**Elements of the Epic**

Both epics are characterized by certain key elements.

* **An Epic Hero**An epic focuses on the adventures of a larger-than-life main character called the **epic hero**. This hero is strong, brave, loyal, and virtuous—although he is sometimes flawed. For example, in Homer’s *Iliad*, Achilles is a courageous warrior whose weakness is his temper. The epic hero also occupies an elevated position in society. He may even be semi-divine. Achilles, for example, is the son of a mortal king and a sea goddess.
* **An Epic Conflict**The plot of an epic centers on the hero’s struggle against an obstacle or series of obstacles. The hero proves his strength, bravery, wisdom, and virtue through valorous deeds—success in battle or adventure. For example, in the *Ramayana*, Prince Rama defeats an evil giant.
* **A Heroic Quest**Often, the hero’s adventure takes the form of a perilous journey, or **quest**, in search of something of value to his people. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the hero embarks on a quest for the secret of immortality.
* **Divine Intervention**The epic hero often receives help from a god or some other supernatural force. However, a different god may also work against the hero. For example, in Homer's *Odyssey*, the goddess Athena helps Odysseus, but the god Poseidon repeatedly tries to destroy him.

**Epic Conventions**

In addition to these key elements, epics also share certain literary characteristics, called **epic conventions**.

* An epic usually begins with an **opening statement of theme**, followed by an **invocation**, or appeal for supernatural help in telling the story.
* The story begins ***in medias res*** (Latin for “in the middle of things”). Readers are plunged right into the action, and then flashbacks and other narrative devices report on earlier events.
* An epic has a **serious tone** and an **elevated style** that reflect the importance of its characters and theme.
* Epics often include **epic similes**, elaborate extended comparisons using like or as. For example, in the *Iliad*, a twelve-line simile compares Achilles’ pursuit of Hector to a mountain hawk swooping down on a dove.
* Epics typically include **epithets**, or stock descriptive words or phrases. Because these poems were originally composed and recited orally, epithets were a kind of shorthand that allowed the poet to describe a character or an object quickly in terms the audience would recognize. **Homeric epithets** are compound phrases such as “the gray-eyed goddess Athena,” “man-killing Hector,” and “the wine-dark sea.”

**Strategies for Reading Epics**

Use these strategies as you read epic literature.

**Focus on the Epic Hero** Analyze the hero’s virtues, strengths, and weaknesses. Make sure you understand what the hero seeks on his quest, and consider how the object of his quest will help his people.

**Identify Cultural Values** Consider the values the epic conveys about the culture that produced it. To pinpoint this cultural context, identify the values the hero embodies and the values he learns to respect on his quest.