11 Characteristics of Epic Heroes

1. The hero is introduced in the midst of turmoil, at a point well into the story; antecedent action will be recounted in flashbacks.
2. The hero is not only a warrior and a leader, but also a polished speaker who can address councils of chieftains or elders with eloquence and confidence.
3. The hero, often a demi-god, possesses distinctive weapons of great size and power, often heirlooms or presents from the gods.
4. The hero must undertake a long, perilous journey, often involving a descent into the Underworld (Greek, "*Neukeia*"), which tests his endurance, courage, and cunning.
5. Although his fellows may be great warriors (like Achilles and Beowulf, he may have a commitatus, or group of noble followers with whom he grew up), he undertakes a task that no one else dare attempt.
6. Whatever virtues his race most prizes, these the epic hero as a cultural exemplar possesses in abundance. His key quality is often emphasized by his stock epithet: "*Resourceful* Odysseus," "*swift-footed* Achilles," "*pious* AEneas."
7. The concept of arete (Greek for "bringing virtue to perfection") is crucial to understanding the epic protagonist.
8. The hero establishes his *aristeia* (nobility) through single combat in *superari a superiore*, honour coming from being vanquished by a superior foe. That is, a hero gains little honour by slaying a lesser mortal, but only by challenging heroes like himself or adversaries of superhuman power.
9. The two great epic adversaries, the hero and his antagonist, meet at the climax, which must be delayed as long as possible to sustain maximum interest. One such device for delaying this confrontation is the nephelistic rescue (utilized by Homer to rescue Paris from almost certain death and defeat at the hands of Menelaus in the Iliad).
10. The hero's epic adversary is often a "god-despiser," one who has more respect for his own mental and physical abilities than for the power of the gods. The adversary might also be a good man sponsored by lesser deities, or one whom the gods desert at a crucial moment.
11. The hero may encounter a numinous phenomenon (a place or person having a divine or supernatural force) such as a haunted wood or enchanting sorceress that he most use strength, cunning, and divine assistance to overcome.