

Senior Final Review Sheet:

Epic and Epic Hero Characteristics

Traits and Characteristics of an Epic: Source: 35 Literary Ideas, Peter Thorpe

1. Usually a long narrative poem, as in Homer's the Iliad and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, though sometimes an epic can be a novel or movie. Ex: Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars*. Contains both high idealism and poetry beauty, but the seamier elements of life are present also.
2. Use of a quick-thinking hero who sees a great deal of action and whose adventures and deeds of valor provide a basic structure that binds the whole poem together into literary unity.
3. Begins with an invocation to the muse as if to ask for divine help in undertaking such a huge project.
4. A habit of beginning in "media res" (in the middle of things) and then flashing back and forth in time.
5. A grand or lofty style [formal language], as might befit the narrating of high heroic actions.
6. Frequent use of epic similes. [Extended similes full of pictorial detail.]
7. A heavy emphasis on bravery, heroism, and noble deeds, with a consequent accent on violence as the solution to human problems. Violence leads to more violence. Revenge is a common motif. Often the epic is powered or "pushed along" by its own "machismo" that usually involves a refusal to compromise or turn back.
8. Intervention by the gods.
9. Divisions of the tale. Often divided into books or cantos, each a different episode.
10. Counsels—gatherings in which leaders or chieftains plan strategies and tactics. These often result in arguments leading to disasters and dangers for all.
11. A preoccupation with weapons.
12. A descent into the underworld. This is to seek enlightenment or information about the future. Kind of a "baptism of fire" before hero can complete his saga.
13. Portents and prophecies. Often ominous in nature. Sometimes marked by supernatural events.
14. "Encyclopedic" manner of narration. Reader feels narrator is well-versed in all things pertaining to the human condition, including the sweep of history, all of religion, all the crafts and arts, and the origins of

Epic/Archetypal Hero: Joseph Campbell began comparing mythologies of the world. The following are the universal traits of the classical or archetypal hero, from which modern superheroes descend:

1. Unusual circumstances of birth; sometimes in danger or born into royalty.
2. Leaves family or land and lives with others.
3. An event, sometimes traumatic, leads to adventure or quest.
4. Hero has a special weapon only he can wield.
5. Hero always has supernatural help.
6. The Hero must prove himself many times while on adventure.
7. The Hero undertakes the Journey and often obtains the Unhealable Wound, which can be either physical, psychological, or emotional.
8. Hero experiences atonement with the father.
9. When the hero dies, he is rewarded spiritually.

Traits of the Tragic Hero and the Classical Tragedy

Tragic hero:

1. The tragic hero is a good person, possessing qualities the society values (at least at the beginning).
2. The tragic hero must be of noble birth.
3. The tragic hero will possess a tragic flaw (hamartia), which is an error character flaw so critical that it ultimately brings the character to his downfall or even his/her death. The tragic hero is neither evil nor extremely virtuous.

Traits of Classical (Aristotelian) and Shakespearean Tragedies:

1. A tragedy is a play, a drama, in which the action is manifested in dialogue spoken by the characters. A tragedy can be pathetically (emotionally) motivated. It can also be ethically (morals, values) motivated.
2. The tragedy is written in verse, in poetry. A Shakespearean tragedy is written mostly in blank verse (unrhymed, iambic pentameter).
3. The play is an imitation of an action; in other words, fiction, not fact.
4. The play must be complete, containing a beginning, a middle, and end.
5. The plot of the play may be either simple or complex:
 - a. A simple plot is one that moves in a straight line directly toward its conclusion.
 - b. A complex one is one that moves in various directions by means of reversal and recognition.
 - Reversal is a change by which the action veers round toward its opposite. This can occur either with a situation as when Romeo and Juliet no longer can be together after Tybalt's death; or it can occur just with a character as when Creon in Antigone reverses his decision to kill Antigone.
 - Recognition is a "change from ignorance to knowledge" as when Oedipus realizes that the murderer he seeks is himself.
6. A tragedy is serious. The action must end unhappily, but to be properly tragic it must have profound consequences involving people whose fate affects others beyond themselves.
7. A Classical tragedy will have a chorus that comments on the action of the central characters. This trait no longer existed in Shakespeare's day.
8. A tragedy will have a tragic hero that displays the characteristics of the tragic hero (see above).
9. A tragedy should arouse "pity and fear" through which it accomplishes catharsis. According to Aristotle, great tragedy provokes these feelings so strongly that the audience expends its emotions in the theater and leaves having been purged of them at least temporarily.
 - a. Shakespeare often use the "comic relief" scene immediately following the "scene of suffering" to both serve as catharsis and to comment in some way of the tragic themes related to the "scene of suffering."

Existential/Absurd Heroes:

Note: Underlined portions summarize key traits of the existential hero:

1. Martin Heidegger, German philosopher: "Existence precedes essence." First the existential hero exists; then he strives to find the meaning of life within himself. The absurd hero fails to realize that the world and its institutions offer no meaning and fails to look within himself for meaning.
 - The existentialist starts with experience first: he exists; because he exists, he thinks; he feels; he perceives. The existentialist denies that there are absolute truths in religion. The existentialist denies that there are absolute truths in ethics. The existentialist starts with his own personal philosophy; he ends with his own personal philosophy. Things exist without meaning; no God created them; whatever significance existence will have, we have to furnish by ourselves. First life exists; secondly, we have to make something of it. Man is different from things because he may become or develop into something other than just being a man. Man does not have a universal or permanent nature as does a stone. He can't be measured, classified, or placed in a situation that will adequately predict his behavior. Of all the objects in the universe, man alone is capable of choosing his own future. "I think, therefore, I am" (Descartes).
2. Jean Paul Sartre: Man leads a life of "dreadful freedom." Man is actually "condemned to be free." The existential hero realizes that he is completely free to choose anything. No God or universal meaning controls us.
 - When the existentialist is not conscious of himself as a being, he feels that he is nothing.
 - The concept of freedom is the root principle of existential thought. Freedom is not economic freedom or rugged individualism, but rather the responsibility of living the right life with relying on ethical guidelines. In other words, making something out of nothing.
 - Comfort and freedom are incompatible. The easy life is the privilege of slaves for whom all the painful decisions are made by others. Freedom is a "terrible gift."
 - Nearly all people try to deny their own freedom. They make believe that they are not free; therefore, they bind themselves with moral bonds and bounds which they claim are higher than their wills.
 - Death is the one certainty in life. Death clarifies the absurdity of life. The existentialists look upon it as a great "nothingness," and it's when you wake up, realize it's going to happen and ask yourself in terror, "What am I failing to do that I need to do to give my life meaning?" that you begin to have purpose. This freedom to choose is essential to the existentialist. Choice is always possible, but what is not possible

is not to choose. "I can always choose, but I ought to know that if I do not choose, I am still choosing—in terms of my own consciousness." [Sartre].

3. It's a fact that the universe is meaningless or "absurd," a favorite word with the Existentialists. The existential hero recognizes and understands that any institutions or belief systems outside himself are absurd. He knows that the only "authentic" experiences are his own. However, this should not be used as an excuse to give up and do nothing. Indeed, according to Sartre, an absurd and totally unresponsive cosmos is all the more reason to make our own meanings in our lives, even if we have to make them under circumstances that are absurd. A prime example of this is described in Albert Camus' "The Myth of Sisyphus." Sisyphus becomes the mythic symbol for man.

- Many in life live as the "absurd" hero, unaware that life is meaningless. The existential hero is the person who recognizes the absurdity and acts upon it. This discovery that life is initially without meaning is actually good news because it gives us the opportunity to make choices and to be free.
- Recognition of the absurd create anxiety about the emptiness around us. After we have confronted our anxiety we are ready to go on and make some significance in our lives. Failure to act is to place one's self in hell, as Sartre tried to show in his play, No Exit. Though life is meaningless, we must fight against death.
- In the mid twentieth century, Paul Tillich of the University of Chicago recognized God with Existentialism by arguing that there is, as he expressed it, "God above God." The visible trappings of religion—the church building, the clergy and their costumes, the ceremonies, Bibles, and crosses—were merely window dressing and not the real thing. The real thing —the "authentic" (another word popular with the existentialists)—was God as he existed above all these trappings, and it would take plenty of effort to get to him. God was not dead, just quite unavailable.

The Modern Hero/Anti-hero

In literature and film, an anti-hero is a central or supporting character that has some of the personality flaws and ultimate fortune traditionally assigned to villains but nonetheless also has enough heroic qualities or intentions to gain the sympathy of readers or viewers. Anti-heroes can be awkward, obnoxious, passive, pitiful, or obtuse—but they are always, in some fundamental way, flawed or failed heroes. In this use, the term tragic hero is sometimes used. Comic books also feature anti-heroes, also known as "dark heroes", who are characters fighting for the side of good, but either with some tragic flaw (such as a tormented past) or by using questionable means to reach their goals.

The concept of the anti-hero has grown from a tendency of modern authors to present villains as complex, even sympathetic, characters whose motivations are not inherently evil and sometimes even good. The line, therefore, between an anti-hero and a villain is sometimes not clear. There are several types of anti-heroes.

- One type of anti-hero feels helpless, distrusts conventional values and is often unable to commit to any ideals, but they accept and often relish their status as outsiders. The cyberpunk genre makes extensive use of this character-type.
- Another type of anti-hero is a character who constantly moves from one disappointment in their lives to the next, without end, with only occasional and fleeting successes. But they persist and even attain a form of heroic success by steadfastly never giving up or changing their goals. These characters often keep a deep-seated optimism that one day, they will succeed. But in the end they still meet the ultimate fate of a traditional villain, failure. A popular example of this is the director Ed Wood, from Tim Burton's famed film of the same name. An example of this secondary type of anti-hero is F. Scott Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby.
- A third type of anti-hero is an individual with the same end goals as a traditional hero, but for whom "the ends justify the means."
- There is also a type of anti-hero who starts the story with a few unlikeable traits such as prejudices, self centeredness, immaturity, cockiness, or a single minded focus on things such as wealth, status, or revenge. Thus, the hero may actually begin the story as a not so likeable character. However, through the course of events, as we get to know the character, they grow and change and may actually become popular. A well known example of this is Han Solo of the Star Wars trilogy. The actor Clint Eastwood became famous by playing the anti-hero in movies such as The Good, the Bad and the Ugly, etc.

Characteristics of Anti-Hero/Heroine

1. Hero as ordinary man
2. Hero as confused adolescent
3. Hero as inadequate man/woman
4. Hero as degenerate
5. Hero as rebel

