

EPIC POETRY
Gregory Booth
Senior English
Sheridan High School

Purpose:

Big Concept:

Epic poetry (specifically folk epics) offers readers a glimpse into the values and beliefs of historical cultures.

Essential Questions:

1. What distinguishes epic poetry from other forms of poetry?
2. How do our first English epics compare to epics from other cultures, i.e. Greece & China?
3. Are some characteristics of epic poetry cross-cultural?

Rationale:

Help students understand the evolution of world literary traditions.

Materials:

1. Copies of Epic Poetry Notes.
2. Textbook containing excerpts from Beowulf, The Niebelungunlied, The Iliad, The Odyssey, & Gilgamesh.
3. Copies of a version of King Gesser & The Yellow Emperor myth.
4. Computers with Internet connection.

Activities:

1. Have students brainstorm a list of their favorite “heroes” and the characteristics of each figure that make them heroic.
2. Lead a discussion / Socratic seminar about heroism. How do we define heroes? How do we treat heroes? What do we expect from our heroes? Why do we feel the need to create fictional heroes?

3. Segue into definition of Epic Poetry - long narratives poems concerning the adventures of legendary heroes.
4. Supply students with notes on Epic Poetry.
5. Explain the difference between folk and literary epics. Folk epics, passed down orally, provide readers with a way to more closely analyze the values of the culture that created the epic in question. For example, Beowulf allows readers to guess at the cultural values of early Anglo-Saxon inhabitants of Western Europe. This oral tradition has largely ceased to exist. Share the story of Samzhub the illiterate Tibetan folk artist who had been asked by the Chinese government to record the tale of “King Gesser” and let students discuss why such a story would matter to the government.
6. Read Beowulf and discuss the elements that make it an epic.
7. Discuss how Beowulf helped establish the English literary tradition.
8. Split students into research groups. Each group will research a different culture’s epic tradition, be it through poetry or simply through the concept of an epic hero. Topics for the research groups should include: Gilgamesh, The Iliad, The Odyssey, King Gesser, The Yellow Emperor, The Nibelungunlied, The Lord of the Rings, Stars Wars, etc. Or, divide students into hemispheres, allowing half the class to research European epic traditions and half the class to research Asian epic traditions.

Assessment:

1. Students prepare a presentation on their epic or epic hero, discussing how it fits into our concept of an epic and, if possible, what it tells us about the people who are responsible for it.

Closing Activity:

1. Lead a discussion on universal themes found in the epics.
2. Students create a character sketch for their family’s or their personal epic hero.

State Standards:

Reading Process:

1. Apply reading comprehension strategies, including making inferences and drawing conclusions.

2. Answer literal, inferential, evaluative and synthesizing questions to demonstrate comprehension.

Reading Applications: Literary Text

1. Compare and contrast motivations of literary characters.
2. Analyze the historical, social and cultural context of setting.
5. Analyze variations of universal themes in literary texts.
7. Compare and contrast varying characteristics of American, British, world and multi-cultural literature.

Writing Processes: 1-17

Research: 1-7

Communication

8. Deliver an informational presentation.