Characteristics of the Epic Hero

Most epic heroes possess most, or all, of the following general characteristics. Use them to help you decide if a character is, indeed, an epic hero or heroine.

1. **A Noble Birth**
   - Most epic heroes will have an above average station in life.
   - They will be kings, princes, or nobles of some sort.
   - Commoners usually do not become epic heroes.

2. **Capable of deeds of great strength and courage**
   - Basically, this means the hero has the potential for great deeds.
   - The magnitude of these actions are well above and beyond what the commoner does.
   - While most epic heroes are good, not all are.

3. **Great Warrior**
   - Before the hero of an epic does his business in the epic, he has usually established himself in combat during a war.
   - Sometimes, as in The Iliad, we see the hero at war.
   - In most, like Beowulf and The Odyssey, the hero has spent much time in battle.

4. **Travels Over a Vast Setting**
   - Simply put, you cannot be an epic hero if you stay in your village your whole life.
   - The more countries or areas traveled to, the better.
   - The farther away from your own country, the better.
   - Distance makes the hero’s actions greater because they aren’t selfish; they are for another country or people.

5. **National Heroism**
   - Before a hero can be celebrated by countries the world over, he must first be recognized in his home country as a great and heroic person.

6. **Humility**
   - Even as the rest of the world recognizes the great deeds of the hero, he is never a braggart or even willing to take applause.
   - He commits his deeds because he knows they need doing, and the fame and rewards that he receives are only a matter of course, not the reason for completing his quests.

7. **Faces Supernatural Foes and/or Receives Supernatural Help**
   - Most epic heroes either receive aid from a god or goddess or battle some superhuman enemy.
   - This is what makes a hero’s action epic: they fight something mere mortals cannot battle. Beowulf has his Grendel; Odysseus his Cyclops.
   - For each hero, the enemy is unique. You won’t see two heroes battling the same foe.