Definitions of Tragedy, Comedy and Epic

**Classical tragedy** – elements include a *tragic hero* who is of higher than ordinary moral worth. Such a man is exhibited as suffering a change in fortune from happiness to misery because of a mistaken act, to which he is led by “an error in judgement” or his tragic flaw. Most often the mistaken act ultimately leads to the hero’s death. We feel pity for the tragic hero because he is not an evil man, so his misfortune is greater than he deserves. There is also a sense that the hero could have been more if not for his tragic flaw. Comic elements may be present in a classical tragedy.

**Classical comedy (also known as tragicomedy)** – comedies of this variety represent a serious action which threatened a tragic disaster to the protagonist, who resembles in most ways a tragic hero, yet by an abrupt reversal of circumstance, the story ends happily. Refer to the above definition for the elements in a classical comedy, noting the change in the ending.

**Epic** – applied to a work that meets at least one of the following criteria: it is a long narrative poem on a great and serious subject, told in an elevated style, and centered on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, a nation, or the human race. The epic typically emphasizes the struggle between the hero’s ethos (the disposition, character, or attitude peculiar to a specific people, culture, or group that distinguishes it from other people of groups; fundamental values or spirit; mores) and his human failings or mortality. An epic contains the following elements:

Note to class: The elements with * are the ones I expect to see you address in a question about epic, although you are encouraged to address other elements, as well.

- catalogs
- digressions*
- long speeches
- journeys or quests
- various trials or tests of the hero*
- similes and metaphors*
- divine intervention*