What is an Epic?

An epic in its most specific sense is a genre of classical poetry originating in Greece. The conventions of this genre are several:

(a) It is a long narrative about a serious or worthy traditional subject.
(b) Its diction is elevated in style. It employs a formal, dignified, objective tone and many figures of speech.
(c) The narrative focused on the exploits of an epic hero or demigod who represents the cultural values of a race, nation, or religious group.
(d) The hero's success or failure determines the fate of an entire people or nation.
(e) The action takes place in a vast setting; it covers a wide geographic area. The setting is frequently set some time in the remote past.
(f) The action contains superhuman feats of strength or military prowess.
(g) Gods or supernatural beings frequently take part in the action to affect the outcome. This supernatural intervention often implies two simultaneous plots.
(h) The poem begins with the invocation of a muse to inspire the poet--i.e., a prayer to an appropriate supernatural being. The speaker asks that this being provide him the suitable emotion, creativity, or diction to finish the poem. Often the poet states a theme or argument for the entire work--such as "arms and the man."
(i) The narrative starts in medias res, in the middle of the action. Subsequently, the earlier events leading up to the start of the poem will be recounted in the characters' narratives or in flashbacks.
(j) The epic contains long catalogs of heroes or important characters, focusing on highborn kings and great warriors rather than peasants and commoners.
(k) The epic employs extended similes (called epic similes) at appropriate spots of the story, and a traditional scene of extended description in which the hero arms himself.
(l) Often, the main protagonist undergoes a terrifying journey--sometimes a descent into the underworld--i.e., into hell or the realm of the dead.

The term applies most directly to classical Greek texts like The Iliad and The Odyssey but it is clear that Roman authors like Virgil intentionally imitate the genre in works like the Aeneid. However, some critics have applied the term more loosely. The Anglo-Saxon poem Beowulf has also been called an epic of Anglo-Saxon culture, Milton's Paradise Lost is called an epic of Christian culture, El Cid is an epic of Spanish culture, Gilgamesh is an epic of Babylonian culture, Longfellow's Hiawatha is an epic of American culture, and Shakespeare's various history plays have been collectively called an epic of Renaissance Britain. Contrast with the mock epics of Alexander Pope and later Enlightenment writers to see its influence in humorous form.