From *Elements of Literature*: **Characteristics of an Epic:**

- A physically impressive hero of national or historical importance
- A vast setting involving much of the known physical world and sometimes the land of the dead as well
- Action such as a quest or journey taken in search of something of value
- Evidence of supernatural forces at work
- Glorification of the hero at the end
- A rootedness in a specific culture and society

**Epic:** Long story told in elevated language (usually poetry), which relates the great deeds of a larger-than-life hero who embodies the values of a particular society. Most epics include elements of myth, legend, folk tale, and history. Their tone is serious and their language is grand. Most epic heroes undertake quests to achieve something of tremendous value to themselves or to their people. Often the hero's quest is set in both heaven and hell. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are the best-known epics in Western civilization.

- Homer's first epic was the *Iliad*, which tells of a ten-year war found on the plains outside the walls of a great city called Troy… The *Odyssey*, Homer's second epic, is the story of the attempt of a Greek soldier, Odysseus, to get home after the Trojan War.

- In Homer's day heroes were thought of as a special class of aristocrats. They were placed somewhere between the gods and ordinary human beings. Heroes experienced pain and death, but they were always sure of themselves, always 'on top of the world.

- Odysseus is a hero in trouble. He is lost in a world of difficult choices. He is searching for inner peace, for a way to reestablish a natural balance in his life.

**Myths:** are stories that use fantasy to express ideas about life that cannot be expressed easily in realistic terms. Myths are essentially religious because they are concerned with the relationship between human beings and the unknown or spiritual realm.

- Homer is always concerned with the relationship between humans and gods. Homer is religious: For him, the gods control all things. Athena, the goddess of wisdom, is always at the side of Odysseus. This is appropriate, because Odysseus is known for his mental abilities. Thus, in Homer's stories a god can be an altar ego, a reflection of a hero's best or worst qualities. The god who works against Odysseus is Poseidon, the god of the seas, who is known for arrogance and a certain brutishness. Odysseus himself can be violent and cruel, just as Poseidon is.