

Part One: A Son Seeks a Father

Book 1: Athena Advises Telemachus

Homer opens with an invocation, or prayer, asking the Muse^o to help him sing his tale. Notice how the singer gives his listeners hints about how his story is to end.

Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story
of that man skilled in all ways of contending,^o
the wanderer, harried for years on end,
after he plundered the stronghold
on the proud height of Troy.

5 He saw the townlands

and learned the minds of many distant men,
and weathered many bitter nights and days
in his deep heart at sea, while he fought only
to save his life, to bring his shipmates home.

10 But not by will nor valor could he save them,
for their own recklessness destroyed them all—
children and fools, they killed and feasted on
the cattle of Lord Helios, the Sun,
and he who moves all day through heaven
15 took from their eyes the dawn of their return.

Of these adventures, Muse, daughter of Zeus,
tell us in our time, lift the great song again.

We learn that Odysseus is alive, twenty years older than when he had left for the war in Troy. He is being kept prisoner on Ogygia, the island of the nymph Calypso, who wants him for herself.

Meanwhile, the gods on Mount Olympus are discussing Odysseus. His patroness there, the goddess Athena, begs her father, Zeus, to allow Odysseus to return safely to his home in Ithaca. But Odysseus has an enemy among the gods. The sea god, Poseidon, is angry at the hero for having blinded his son, the Cyclops called Polyphemus. Zeus agrees with Athena, and Hermes, the messenger god, is to be sent to Ogygia to command Calypso to free Odysseus.

Athena's next move is to make her way to Ithaca to help Odysseus's young son, Telemachus, cope with another problem. His home—the palace of Odysseus—is overrun by his mother's suitors. Those arrogant men have taken over Odysseus's house. They are partying on the boy's inheritance and are demanding that his mother, Penelope, take one of them as a husband.

Here we now have the main themes of the epic:

There were nine Muses, daughters of Zeus. They inspired people to produce music, poetry, dance, and all the other arts.

2. contending: fighting, arguing.

1. A boy must struggle to become a man.
2. A soldier must struggle to get home from a war.
3. A king must struggle to reclaim a kingdom (Ithaca).

Now the goddess Athena arrives on the scene in Ithaca. Disguised as Mentor, an old family friend, she mingles with the mob of suitors and waits to talk to Telemachus:

Long before anyone else, the prince Telemachus
now caught sight of Athena—for he, too,
20 was sitting there, unhappy among the suitors,
a boy, daydreaming. What if his great father
came from the unknown world and drove these men
like dead leaves through the place, recovering
honor and lordship in his own domains?

25 Then he who dreamed in the crowd gazed out at Athena.

Straight to the door he came, irked with himself
to think a visitor had been kept there waiting,
and took her right hand, grasping with his left
her tall bronze-bladed spear. Then he said warmly:

30 "Greetings, stranger! Welcome to our feast.
There will be time to tell your errand later."

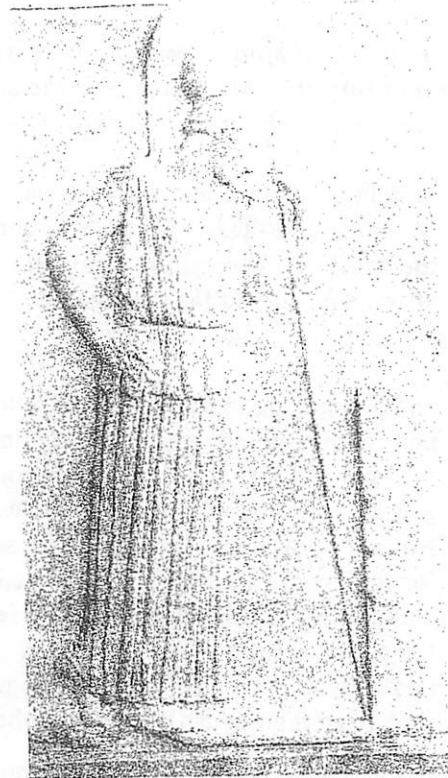
He led the way, and Pallas Athena followed
into the lofty hall. The boy reached up
and thrust her spear high in a polished rack
35 against a pillar, where tough spear on spear
of the old soldier, his father, stood in order.
Then, shaking out a splendid coverlet,
he seated her on a throne with footrest—all
finely carved—and drew his painted armchair

40 near her, at a distance from the rest.
To be amid the din, the suitors' riot,
would ruin his guest's appetite, he thought,
and he wished privacy to ask for news
about his father, gone for years.

As Telemachus and the goddess-in-disguise talk, the suitors are partying loudly all around them. Telemachus tells the goddess that the men are eating through all they have, courting his mother, and using his house as if it were theirs to wreck and plunder.

45 Pallas Athena was disturbed, and said:

"Ah, bitterly you need Odysseus, then!
High time he came back to engage these upstarts.
I wish we saw him standing helmeted
there in the doorway, holding shield and spear,



Athena (c. 460 B.C.). Stone.

Acropolis Museum, Athens
Photo: Art Resource

50 looking the way he did when I first knew him. . . .
If I were you,
I should take steps to make these men disperse.
Listen, now, and attend to what I say:
at daybreak call the islanders to assembly,
55 and speak your will, and call the gods to witness:
the suitors must go scattering to their homes.
Then here's a course for you, if you agree:
get a sound craft afloat with twenty oars
and go abroad for news of your lost father—
60 perhaps a traveler's tale, or rumored fame
issued from Zeus abroad in the world of men.
Talk to that noble sage^o at Pylos, Nestor,
then go to Menelaus, the red-haired king
at Sparta, last man home of all the Achaeans.
65 If you should learn your father is alive
and coming home, you could hold out a year.
Or if you learn that he is dead and gone,
then you can come back to your own dear country
and raise a mound for him, and burn his gear,
70 with all the funeral honors due the man,
and give your mother to another husband.

When you have done all this, or seen it done,
it will be time to ponder
concerning these contenders in your house—
75 how you should kill them, outright or by guile.^o
You need not bear this insolence^o of theirs,
you are a child no longer."

62. sage: wise person.

75. guile: slyness, trickery.

76. insolence: rudeness, lack of respect.

Book 2: Telemachus Confronts the Suitors

Frustrated in his attempts to control the suitors, who are older and more powerful than he is; Telemachus decides to follow Athena's advice. He tries in public to become his "father's son."

When primal Dawn spread on the eastern sky
her fingers of pink light, Odysseus's true son
80 stood up, drew on his tunic and his mantle,
slung on a sword belt and a new-edged sword,
tied his smooth feet into good rawhide sandals,
and left his room, a god's brilliance upon him.
He found the criers with clarion^o voices and told them
85 to muster the unshorn^o Achaeans in full assembly.
The call sang out, and the men came streaming in;
and when they filled the assembly ground, he entered,
spear in hand, with two quick hounds at heel;
Athena lavished on him a sunlit grace

84. clarion: clear and ringing.

85. unshorn: unshaven.

90 that held the eye of the multitude. Old men
made way for him as he took his father's chair.

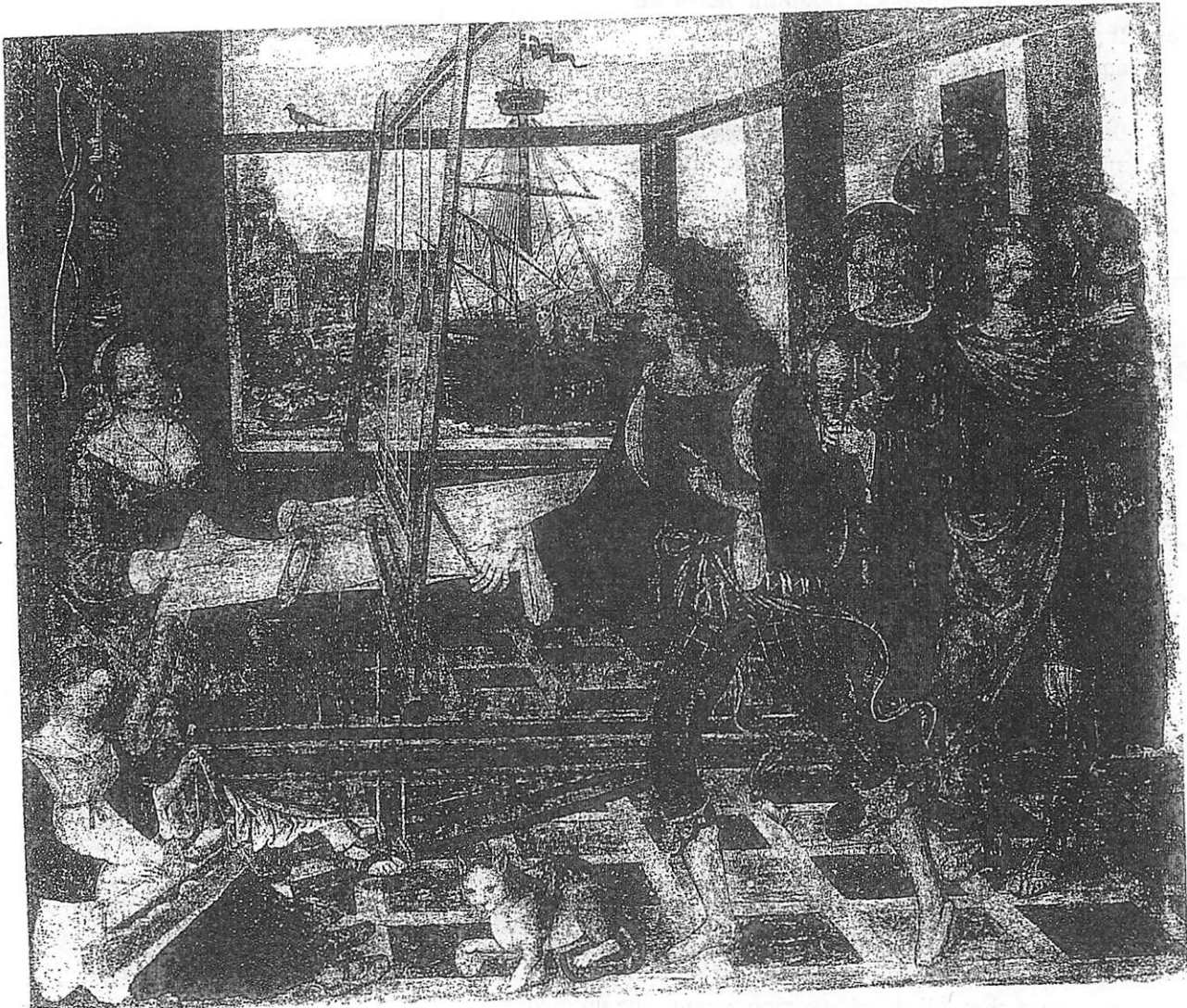
Telemachus complains of the way his family is treated by the suitors. He especially resents the way they treat his mother. The suitors answer through Antinous, the most arrogant suitor of them all. He demands that Penelope choose one of them in marriage, and he blames her for her trickery.

95 "For three years now—and it will soon be four—
she has been breaking the hearts of the Achaeans,
holding out hope to all, and sending promises
to each man privately—but thinking otherwise."

Here is an instance of her trickery:
she had her great loom standing in the hall
and the fine warp of some vast fabric on it;
we were attending her, and she said to us:

Scene from the *Odyssey* by Bernardino Pintoricchio (1509). Fresco.

The National Gallery, London. Photo: The Granger Collection, New York.



- 100 'Young men, my suitors, now my lord is dead,
let me finish my weaving before I marry,
or else my thread will have been spun in vain.
It is a shroud° I weave for Lord Laertes,
when cold death comes to lay him on his bier.°
- 105 The country wives would hold me in dishonor
if he, with all his fortune, lay unshrouded.'
We have men's hearts; she touched them; we agreed.
So every day she wove on the great loom—
but every night by torchlight she unwove it;
- 110 and so for three years she deceived the Achaeans.
But when the seasons brought the fourth around,
one of her maids, who knew the secret, told us;
we found her unraveling the splendid shroud.
She had to finish then, although she hated it.
- 115 Now here is the suitors' answer—
you and all the Achaeans, mark it well:
dismiss your mother from the house, or make her marry
the man her father names and she prefers.
Does she intend to keep us dangling forever?"

*In the face of this stalemate, Telemachus decides to sail away
in search of his father.*

- 120 The assembly broke up; everyone went home—
the suitors home to Odysseus's house again.
But Telemachus walked down along the shore
and washed his hands in the foam of the gray sea,
then said this prayer:

"O god of yesterday,

- 125 guest in our house, who told me to take ship
on the hazy sea for news of my lost father,
listen to me, be near me:
the Achaeans only wait, or hope to hinder me,
the damned insolent suitors most of all."
- 130 Athena was nearby and came to him,
putting on Mentor's figure and his tone,
the warm voice in a lucid flight of words:
- "You'll never be fainthearted or a fool,
Telemachus, if you have your father's spirit;
- 135 he finished what he cared to say,
and what he took in hand he brought to pass.
The sea routes will yield their distances
to his true son, Penelope's true son—
I doubt another's luck would hold so far.
- 140 The son is rare who measures with his father,
and one in a thousand is a better man,
but you will have the sap and wit

103. shroud: a cloth that is used to wrap up
the dead body.

104. bier (bir): platform on which a coffin is
placed.

and prudence—for you get that from Odysseus—
to give you a fair chance of winning through.
145 So never mind the suitors and their ways,
there is no judgment in them, neither do they
know anything of death and the black terror
close upon them—doom's day on them all. . . .”

Quietly, Telemachus goes home and again bears the mockery of the suitors. With the help of his old nurse, Eurycleia, he prepares for the journey in search of his father. Athena, still disguised as Mentor, borrows a ship and rounds up a crew, and off they sail in the night. Telemachus's only concern is a human one: he worries about his mother and begs the nurse not to tell her he has gone until some days have passed.

Book 3: The Visit to Nestor

At sunrise, Telemachus's ship arrives at Pylos, the land of King Nestor. Homer's listeners must have felt their interest quickening at the appearance of this familiar hero of the Trojan War days—we feel the same pleasure today when a favorite character from one book or movie suddenly turns up in another. Surrounded by his faithful sons and subjects, and dutifully offering prayers to the gods, Nestor stands in perfect contrast to Odysseus's family and their chaotic situation in Ithaca. Telemachus and Athena arrive during a religious ritual, in honor of the sea god Poseidon, the “blue-maned god who makes the islands tremble.”

On the shore
150 black bulls were being offered by the people
to the blue-maned god who makes the islands tremble:
nine congregations, each five hundred strong,
led out nine bulls apiece to sacrifice,
taking the tripe^o to eat, while on their altars
155 thighbones in fat lay burning for the god.
Here they put in, furred sail, and beached the ship;
but Telemachus hung back in disembarking,
so that Athena turned and said:

“Not the least shyness, now, Telemachus.
160 You came across the open sea for this—
to find out where the great earth hides your father
and what the doom was that he came upon.
Go to old Nestor, master charioteer,^o
so we may broach the storehouse of his mind.
165 Ask him with courtesy, and in his wisdom
he will tell you history and no lies.”

But clear-headed Telemachus replied:

154. tripe: lining of the stomach.

163. charioteer: Nestor had driven those horse-drawn carts used in ancient times for war.

“Mentor, how can I do it, how approach him?
I have no practice in elaborate speeches, and
170 for a young man to interrogate an old man
seems disrespectful—”

But the gray-eyed goddess said:

“Reason and heart will give you words, Telemachus;
and a spirit will counsel others. I should say
the gods were never indifferent to your life.”

175 She went on quickly, and he followed her
to where the men of Pylos had their altars.
Nestor appeared enthroned among his sons,
while friends around them skewered the red beef
or held it scorching. When they saw the strangers
180 a hail went up, and all that crowd came forward
calling out invitations to the feast. . . .

Meanwhile the spits were taken off the fire,
portions of crisp meat for all. They feasted,
and when they had eaten and drunk their fill, at last
185 they heard from Nestor, prince of charioteers:

“Now is the time,” he said, “for a few questions,
now that our young guests have enjoyed their dinner.
Who are you, strangers? . . .”

Telemachus says he is Odysseus's son, and he asks for news of his lost father. Nestor is full of praise for the lost soldier, and he quickly recognizes the heroic qualities of the son. Notice how Nestor prepares us for the later entrance of the absent hero himself.

“Your father?”

190 Well, I must say I marvel at the sight of you:
your manner of speech couldn't be more like his;
one would say No; no boy could speak so well.
And all that time at Ilion, he and I
were never at odds in council or assembly—
195 saw things the same way, had one mind between us
in all the good advice we gave the Argives. . . .
Who knows, your father might come home some day
alone or backed by troops, and have it out with them.
If gray-eyed Athena loved you
200 the way she did Odysseus in the old days,
in Troy country, where we all went through so much—
never have I seen the gods help any man
as openly as Athena did your father—
well, as I say, if she cared for you that way,
205 there would be those to quit this marriage game.”

But prudently Telemachus replied:

"I can't think what you say will ever happen, sir.
It is a dazzling hope. But not for me.
It could not be—even if the gods willed it."

210 At this gray-eyed Athena broke in, saying:

"What strange talk you permit yourself, Telemachus.
A god could save the man by simply wishing it—
from the farthest shore in the world."

Book 4: The Visit to Menelaus and Helen

Nestor sends Telemachus off to continue his search in Sparta. There, two more favorites of the Trojan War story, King Menelaus and his wife, Helen, now live peacefully. Like Homer's Greek audience, we remember throughout Telemachus's stay in Sparta that this Helen was the very cause of the Trojan War itself.

Telemachus is awed at Menelaus's palace, luminous with bronze, gold, amber, silver, and ivory. He does not reveal his identity to Menelaus or to Helen; Athena is still disguised as Mentor.

The old commander Menelaus begins to tell war stories. As he reminisces about Odysseus, the absent hero becomes more and more vivid. Remember that Menelaus does not realize here that he is talking to Odysseus's own son. Menelaus speaks:

"No soldier
215 took on so much, went through so much, as Odysseus.
That seems to have been his destiny, and this mine—
to feel each day the emptiness of his absence,
ignorant, even, whether he lived or died.
How his old father and his quiet wife,
220 Penelope, must miss him still!
And Telemachus, whom he left as a newborn child."

Now hearing these things said, the boy's heart rose
in a long pang for his father, and he wept,
holding his purple mantle with both hands
225 before his eyes. Menelaus knew him now,
and so fell silent with uncertainty
whether to let him speak and name his father
in his own time, or to inquire, and prompt him.
And while he pondered, Helen came
230 out of her scented chamber, a moving grace
like Artemis,^o straight as a shaft of gold. . . .
Reclining in her light chair with its footrest,
Helen gazed at her husband and demanded:

"Menelaus, my lord, have we yet heard

231. Artemis (är'tə-mis): goddess of the hunt.



- 235 our new guests introduce themselves? Shall I
dissemble^o what I feel? No, I must say it.
Never, anywhere, have I seen so great a likeness
in man or woman—but it is truly strange!
This boy must be the son of Odysseus,
240 Telemachus, the child he left at home
that year the Achaean host made war on Troy—
daring all for the wanton^o that I was.’

Menelaus and Helen tell Telemachus they have heard that Odysseus is alive, that he is living with the nymph, Calypso, and that he longs for a way of returning home.

Having increased our suspense, Homer at this point takes us back to Ithaca where we learn that the suitors intend to ambush and kill Telemachus upon his return.

Now, with the themes of the epic established, we are ready to meet Odysseus in person.

Here we will imagine that Homer stops for the night. The listeners would now go off to various corners of the local nobleman's house—as Telemachus and his friends would have done after their evening of talk and feasting with Menelaus and Helen. The blind poet might well have taken a glass of wine before turning in. The people who had heard the bard's stories might have asked questions among themselves and looked forward to the next evening's installment.

236. *dissemble*: conceal.

242. *wanton*: immoral woman.

Responding to the Epic

Analyzing the Epic

Identifying Facts

1. Instead of beginning his epic with the adventures of Odysseus, Homer takes four books to describe the problems and travels of the hero's son, Telemachus. Describe the specific problems that exist in Ithaca with Odysseus gone.
2. What **actions** does Athena advise Telemachus to take? How does Athena use her divine powers to transform Telemachus from time to time?
3. According to Antinous, what trick has Penelope used to deceive the suitors?
4. What does Telemachus learn about his father from Menelaus?
5. How are Telemachus and Athena received by Nestor and his family? How does this contrast with the way the boy is treated in his own home, in Ithaca?

Interpreting Meanings

6. According to the poet's opening prayer to the Muse, why are all of Odysseus's companions going to die before they reach home? What do this and other details tell you about the importance of the gods in Homer's time?
7. We have heard several people talking about the absent hero, including the poet himself in his invocation to the Muse. Describe what we know so far about Odysseus's **character**. What are his main traits?
8. Describe the kind of person Telemachus is. What are his strengths and weaknesses?
9. We all know how hard it is to follow in someone else's footsteps. What are the specific problems that confront Telemachus—or anyone else who feels he must "wear his father's (or mother's) shoes"?
10. What women have you met so far in the epic? Based on what you've seen, describe the roles women seem to take in Homeric society.
11. What elements of the story thus far could be related to life as you know it? Consider the **characters**, their **conflicts**, and the **steps taken** to resolve the conflicts.
12. Suppose you were Telemachus and your father

had never returned from a long war, and your mother was pestered by men who wanted to marry her and who were sponging off her. How would you handle your problems?

13. Like all good storytellers, Homer knew he had to make his listeners feel **suspense**—he wanted them to wonder "What will happen next?" List at least three questions a listener would have at this point in the story: include questions about Odysseus, Penelope, and Telemachus.

Analyzing Language and Vocabulary

Figures of Speech

In the following **figures of speech**, the poet compares one thing to something else, something quite different from it in all but a few important ways. Answer the questions after each figure of speech to show that you understand the comparison it is based on.

1. ". . . What if his great father
came from the unknown world and drove these
men
like dead leaves through the place . . ."

(Lines 21–23)

 - a. What are the dead leaves compared to?
 - b. What action do you see when you read this figure of speech?
2. "When primal Dawn spread on the eastern sky
her fingers of pink light . . ."

(Lines 78–79)

 - a. What aspect of the dawn is being compared to fingers of pink light?
 - b. **Personification** is a figure of speech in which something inanimate or not alive is spoken of as if it were a person. What is personified in these lines?
3. ". . . black bulls were being offered by the
people
to the blue-maned god who makes the islands
tremble."

(Lines 150–151)

 - a. The blue-maned god is Poseidon. What exactly is his "blue mane"?
 - b. What creature usually is spoken of as having a "mane"?



235 our new guests introduce themselves? Shall I
dissemble^c what I feel? No, I must say it.
Never, anywhere, have I seen so great a likeness
in man or woman—but it is truly strange!
This boy must be the son of Odysseus,
240 Telemachus, the child he left at home
that year the Achaean host made war on Troy—
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730 The Elements of the Epic

236. dissemble: conceal.

242. wanton: immoral woman.