Books 1-4 of the epic tell about Odysseus’s son, Telemachus. Telemachus has been searching the Mediterranean world for his father, who has never returned from the ten-year Trojan War. (Today, Odysseus would be listed as missing in action.) When we first meet Odysseus, in Book 5 of the epic, he is a prisoner of the beautiful goddess Calypso. The old soldier is in despair: He has spent ten years (seven of them as Calypso's not entirely unwilling captive) trying to get home.

The goddess Athena has supported and helped Odysseus on his long journey. Now she begs her father, Zeus, to help her favorite mortal, and Zeus agrees. He sends the messenger god Hermes to Calypso’s island to order Odysseus released. Although Calypso is not described as evil, her seductive charms—even her promises of immortality for Odysseus—threaten to keep the hero away from his wife, Penelope.

No words were lost on Hermes the Wayfinder who bent to tie his beautiful sandals on, ambrosial, golden, that carry him over water or over endless land in a swish of the wind, and took the wand with which he charms asleep—or when he wills, awake—the eyes of men. So wand in hand he paced into the air, shot from Pieria down, down to sea level, and veered to skim the swell. A gull patrolling between the wave crests of the desolate sea will dip to catch a fish, and douse his wings; no higher above the whitecaps Hermes flew until the distant island lay ahead, then rising shoreward from the violet ocean he stepped up to the cave. Divine Calypso, the mistress of the isle, was now at home. Upon her hearthstone a great fire blazing scented the farthest shores with cedar smoke and smoke of thyme, and singing high and low in her sweet voice, before her loom aweaving, she passed her golden shuttle to and fro. A deep wood grew outside, with summer leaves of alder and black poplar, pungent cypress. Ornate birds here rested their stretched wings—horned owls, falcons, cormorants—long-tongued beachcombing birds, and followers of the sea. Around the smooth-walled cave a crooking vine held purple clusters under plyo of green; and four springs, bubbling up near one another shallow and clear, took channels here and there through beds of violets and tender parsley. Even a god who found this place would gaze, and feel his heart beat with delight: so Hermes did; but when he had gazed his fill he entered the wide cave. Now face-to-face
the magical Calypso recognized him,
as all immortal gods know one another
on sight—though seeming strangers, far from home.

But he saw nothing of the great Odysseus,
who sat apart, as a thousand times before,
and racked his own heart groaning, with eyes wet
scanning the bare horizon of the sea. . . .

Hermes tells Calypso that she must give up Odysseus forever. Now we are directly introduced to Odysseus. Notice what this great warrior is doing when we first meet him.

The strong god glittering left her as he spoke,
and now her ladyship, having given heed
to Zeus's mandate, went to find Odysseus
in his stone seat to seaward-tear on tear
brimming his eyes. The sweet days of his lifetime
were running out in anguish over his exile,
for long ago the nymph had ceased to please.
Though he fought shy of her and her desire,
he lay with her each night, for she compelled him.
But when day came he sat on the rocky shore
and broke his own heart groaning, with eyes wet
scanning the bare horizon of the sea.
Now she stood near him in her beauty, saying:

"O forlorn man, be still.
Here you need grieve no more; you need not feel
your life consumed here; I have pondered it,
and I shall help you go. . . ."

Calypso promises Odysseus a raft and provisions to help him homeward without harm-provided the gods wish it. Now Odysseus and Calypso say goodbye.

Swiftly she turned and led him to her cave,
and they went in, the mortal and immortal.
He took the chair left empty now by Hermes,
where the divine Calypso placed before him victuals and drink of men; then she sat down facing Odysseus, while her serving maids brought nectar and ambrosia to her side.
Then each one's hands went out on each one's feast
until they had had their pleasure; and she said:
"Son of Laertes, versatile Odysseus,
after these years with me, you still desire your old home? Even so, I wish you well.
If you could see it all, before you go-
all the adversity you face at sea-
you would stay here, and guard this house, and be
immortal—though you wanted her forever,
that bride for whom you pine each day.
Can I be less desirable than she is?

Less interesting? Less beautiful? Can mortals
compare with goddesses in grace and form?"

To this the strategist Odysseus answered:

"My lady goddess, there is no cause for anger.
My quiet Penelope—how well I know—
would seem a shade before your majesty,
death and old age being unknown to you,
while she must die. Yet, it is true, each day
I long for home, long for the sight of home. . . ."

So Odysseus builds the raft and sets sail. But the sea god Poseidon is by no means ready
to allow an easy passage over his watery domain. He raises a storm and destroys the
raft. It is only with the help of Athena and a sea nymph that Odysseus arrives, broken
and battered, on the island of Scheria (SKEE ree uh). There he hides himself in a pile of
leaves and falls into a deep sleep.

A man in a distant field, no hearth fires near,
will hide a fresh brand in his bed of embers
to keep a spark alive for the next day;
so in the leaves Odysseus hid himself,
while over him Athena showered sleep
that his distress should end, and soon, soon.

In quiet sleep she sealed his cherished eyes.

(from Book 5)