Part One: (Books 1-4)

A Son Seeks a Father
**Book 1: Athena Advises Telemachus**

*Homer opens with an “invocation,” or prayer, asking the Muse (a daughter of Zeus) to help him sing his tale. Notice how the singer gives the listeners hints about how his story will end.*

Tell me, Muse, the story of that resourceful man who wandered far and wide after he had conquered the famous city of Troy. Then he visited the cities of many people, and he learned their customs and ways. He suffered a lot on the high seas while trying to save his life and bring his soldiers home safely. But he failed to save his men, in spite of all his efforts. It was his men’s fault that they were doomed because they ate the sacred cattle of Helios, the Sun-god, who snatched away their chance of ever returning home. Tell us his story, goddess daughter of Zeus, starting wherever you wish.

*We learn that Odysseus is alive, 20 years older than when he had left for the war in Troy. He is being held prisoner on the island of Calypso (a sea nymph) who wants him for herself (she wants to make him her immortal husband).*

*Meanwhile, the gods on Mount Olympus are discussing Odysseus. His patroness, 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 Calypso’s island to command her 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.*

*Now the goddess Athena arrives on the scene in Ithaca. Disguised as Mentor (she magically transforms her shape into that of an old male friend of the family), she mingles with the mob of suitors and waits to talk to Telemachus.*

Long before anyone else, Prince Telemachus now saw the disguised stranger (Athena)—for he, too, was sitting there, unhappy among the suitors, a boy, daydreaming. What if his great father came home from out of the blue and drove these men out of his father’s house so he could get back his honor and be in charge of the house? When Telemachus caught sight of Athena, he went straight to the door; he was ashamed that a stranger or visitor had been kept standing at the gate. He shook the stranger’s right hand, grasping the tall bronze-bladed spear with his left. Then he said warmly:

*“Greetings, stranger! Welcome to our feast. You can tell us what brought you here after you have had something to eat.”*

He led the way, and Athena followed into the great hall. Telemachus reached up and put her spear high in a wooden rack against a pillar, next to the many spears of his father, Odysseus. Then, putting a beautiful tablecloth on a beautifully carved chair for the stranger, he pulled up another painted armchair near her, at a distance from the crowd. All the noise from the suitors’ partying would ruin his guest’s appetite, he thought, and he wanted privacy to ask for news about his father who had been 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.*

Athena was disturbed, and said: “Ah, you really need your father, Odysseus, then! It’s about time he came back to engage this mob of suitors. I wish we saw him standing at the doorway in his helmet, holding his shield and spear, looking the way he did when I first knew him…. 
He found men with loud voices to call out to gather the long-haired Achaeans at the palace. The call went out, and the men got there quickly. When the men of the land had filled the assembly ground, Telemachus entered, spear in hand, with two hunting dogs; Athena (with her powers) gave him a glowing appearance that made everyone in the crowd admire him. 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 to marry, and he blames Penelope for being sneaky and using tricks.**

“For three years now—and it will soon be four—your mother has been breaking our hearts, leading all of us on and giving each of us hope; she even made promises to each of us in private that she had no intention of keeping.

Here is an example of her trickery: she had her big loom standing in the hall and the fine web of some huge fabric on it; we were hanging out there, and she said to us: ‘Young men, my suitors, now that my husband is dead, let me finish my weaving before I get married, or else my time and thread will be wasted. It is a death shroud/covering I am weaving for Lord Laertes, Odysseus’s father, for the future when he dies. The country wives would think it a scandal if Laertes, with all his fortune, were laid to rest without this shroud.’ She touched our hearts and we agreed. So every day she wove on the great loom—but every night by torchlight she undid it; and so for three years she tricked us. But when the seasons brought the fourth year 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.”

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If I were you, I would find some way of getting rid of these suitors. Listen carefully to what I suggest: at daybreak call the islanders together and announce your decision to them, asking the gods to witness what you say: the suitors must leave and go to their homes. Then here’s my advice for you: choose your best ship with twenty oarsmen and set out to find news of your lost father—someone may be able to tell you about him or you may pick up on one of those rumors from Zeus that so often turn out to be true. First, talk to that noble wise man at Pylos, King Nestor, then go to Menelaus, the red-haired king at Sparta, who was the last man to come home from the war of all the Achaeans. If you find out that your father is alive and coming home, you could put up with this for a year. Or if you learn that he is dead and gone, then you can come back to your own dear country to build a burial mound to give him the proper funeral that he deserves, and give your mother in marriage to another husband.

When you have done all this, you must think of some way to destroy this mob of suitors in your house—how you should kill them, either by fighting them in the open or by trickery. You don’t have to put up with this lack of respect from them; you are no longer a child.”

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**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 Mentor’s (Athena’s) advice. He tries in public to become his “father’s son.”_

At dawn the next morning, Odysseus’s son got out of bed and got dressed, slung on a sword belt and a sharp sword, tied his smooth feet into good rawhide sandals, and left his room, looking like a god.
Antinous continued, “Now here is the suitor’s answer—Telemachus, kick your mother out of the house and make her marry the man her father names and she prefers. Will she keep us dangling forever?”

With this standoff, Telemachus decides to sail away in search of his father.

Everyone then went home—except for the suitors who all went back to Odysseus’s house. 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, guest in our house, who told me to get a ship to sail the sea for news of my lost father, listen to me, be near me: all my countrymen, especially the suitors, are trying to stop me from being successful.”

Athena was nearby and came to him disguised once again as Mentor (in look and in voice) and said, “You’ll never be a coward or a fool, Telemachus, if you have your father’s spirit—he was a real man! Your journey will be successful because the sea will help out the true son of Odysseus and Penelope (no one else would be as lucky). Few sons are like their fathers; usually they are worse and a few are better. You have your father’s smarts and you will be successful. So forget the suitors and their sneaky plots—they are fools and idiots. They also have no idea of the dark terror that is coming their way and will strike them down in a single day!”

Quietly, Telemachus goes home and again puts up with 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 about his mother and her feelings, so he begs the nurse not to tell her he has gone until some days have passed.

**Book 3: The Visit to King Nestor**

At sunrise, Telemachus’s ship arrives at Pylos, the land of King Nestor. Homer’s listeners must have gotten excited at the mention of Nestor (a famous hero of the Trojan War)—we feel the same pleasure today when a favorite character from one book or movie suddenly turns up in another. Surrounded by faithful sons and subjects, and offering prayers to the gods, Nestor is the 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, black bulls were being offered by the people to the blue-maned god who makes the islands tremble; nine congregations, each 500 strong, led out nine bulls apiece to sacrifice, taking the stomach linings to eat, while burning thigh-bones for the god. Here they took down their sail and beached the ship; but Telemachus was the last to leave the boat. Athena turned and said: “Not the least shyness, now, Telemachus. You came across the open sea for this—to find out where your father’s bones are buried or how he died. Go to old King Nestor so we may find out if he knows anything. Ask him politely to just tell you the truth.”

But thoughtful Telemachus replied: “Mentor, how can I do it, how can I go right up to him? I have no practice in making speeches, and it is embarrassing for a young man to question a King who is so much older….”

But the gray-eyed goddess said: “Telemachus, where your own intelligence fails, a god will inspire you. I think the gods have blessed both your birth and your progress in becoming a man.”
Athena went on quickly, and he followed her to where the men of Pylos had their altars. King Nestor appeared enthroned among his sons, while friends around them skewered the red beef and cooked it. When they saw the strangers, they shook their hands and invited them to join them. Meanwhile the meat was taken off the fire for all to enjoy. They feasted, and when they had eaten and drunk their fill, at last they heard from King Nestor: “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. King 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? Well, I must say I marvel at the sight of you: the way you talk couldn’t be more like him; one would say no boy could speak this well. Who knows, your father might come home some day alone or backed by troops, and have it out with these suitors you have told me about. If gray-eyed Athena loved you the way she did Odysseus in the old days, in Troy, where we all went through a lot—never have I seen the gods help any man as openly as Athena did your father—well, as I say, if she loved and cared for you that way, those suitors would have their thoughts of marrying your mom knocked out of their heads forever.”

But thoughtfully Telemachus replied:
“There’s no hope of that happening, sir; it’s impossible. Even with all my hopes, it will never happen—even if the gods willed it.

At this, gray-eyed Athena broke in, saying:
“What are you saying, Telemachus? A god who wants to could bring anyone safely home however far away he may be.”

Book 4: The Visit to King Menelaus and Helen

King 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, lit up 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 that he is talking to Odysseus’s own son. Menelaus speaks:

“No soldier took on as much or went through so much as Odysseus. That seems to have been his destiny, and this mine—to miss him so much and not know whether he lived or died. His old father and his wife Penelope must miss him still! And even Telemachus, whom he left as a newborn baby when he left for war.”

Now hearing King Menelaus’s words, Telemachus started to cry when he heard about his father; tears rolled down his cheeks, and he used both hands to hold his purple cloak in front of his eyes. Menelaus recognized him now and didn’t know whether to let Telemachus speak and name his father in his own time, or to question him. While he was thinking, Helen came out of her scented bedroom. She sat down on a chair and asked her husband about everything: “Menelaus, have we yet heard our new guest introduce themselves? Shall I conceal what I feel? No, I have to tell the truth. Never, anywhere, have I seen so great a likeness in man or woman!”
“This boy must be the son of Odysseus, Telemachus, the child he left at home the year he went off to war in Troy—daring all for the shameless creature 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 story 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. Homer, the blind poet, might well have taken a glass of wine before turning in. The people who had heard the stories might have asked questions among themselves and looked forward to the next evening’s installment.

Questions for Books 1-4:

Book 1:
1. Who does Homer call upon to help him begin telling the story?
2. Why is Poseidon furious with Odysseus?
3. In what disguise does Athena first appear to Telemachus?
4. What advice does Athena give to Telemachus?

Book 2:
1. What does Athena instruct Telemachus to do?
2. What trick had Penelope used to stall the suitors?
3. Athena, as Mentor, tells Telemachus that he will be successful. What advantage does Telemachus have that others don’t?
4. What secret does Telemachus tell his nurse, Eurycleia?

Book 3:
1. Why is Telemachus nervous about talking to the king?
2. What does Telemachus tell King Nestor he has come to Pylos in search of?
3. Does Nestor know where Odysseus is at?
4. What does Telemachus say that makes Athena slightly angry?

Book 4:
1. Why is Helen so famous? (or infamous?)
2. What does King Menelaus say that causes Telemachus to cry?
3. Does Menelaus know where Odysseus is at?
4. What does Antinous plan to do to Telemachus when he returns?