Tell the Story

Homer opens with an invocation, or prayer, asking the Muse 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, the wanderer, harried for years on end, after he plundered the stronghold on the proud height of Troy.

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.

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 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. Begin when all the rest who left behind them headlong death in battle or at sea had long ago returned, while he alone still hungered for home and wife. Her ladyship Calypso chung to him in her sea-barrowed caves—a nymph, immortal and most beautiful, who craved him for her own.

And when long years and seasons
wheeling brought around that point of time ordained for him to make his passage homeward, trials and dangers, even so, attended him even in Ithaca, near those he loved.

Yet all the gods had pitied Lord Odysseus, all but Poseidon, raging cold and rough against the brave king till he came ashore at last on his own land....

(from Book 1)

Oro presentation.
1–32. Read this prayer to the Muse aloud. (You and a partner could read it as a chorus, or you could alternate with single voices.) What does Homer tell you about the hero and about what is going to happen to him?
PART ONE: THE WANDERINGS

CALYPSO, THE SWEET NYMPH

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, 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, a golden, that carry him over water or over endless land in a swirl 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 douce 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 weaving, 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 ply 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 raked 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 will 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 pleasures, and she said:

“Son of Laertes,” versatil 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 (skhêra’-a). 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.

Vocabulary
adversity (ad-ver’s-e-té) n.: hardship; great misfortune.

My name is Calypso
And I have lived alone
I live on an island
And I waken to the dawn
A long time ago
I watched him struggle with the sea
I knew that he was drowning
And I brought him into me
Now today
Come morning light
He sails away
After one last night
I let him go.

My name is Calypso
My garden overflows
Thick and wild and hidden
Is the sweetness there that grows
My hair it blows long
As I sing into the wind
I tell of nights
Where I could taste the salt on his skin

Salt of the waves
And of tears
And though he pulled away
I kept him here for years
I let him go.

My name is Calypso
I have let him go
In the dawn he sails away
To be gone forever more
And the waves will take him in again
But he’ll know their ways now
I will stand upon the shore
With a clean heart
And my song in the wind
The sand will sting my feet
And the sky will burn
It’s a lonely time ahead
I do not ask him to return
I let him go
I let him go.
"I AM LAERTES' SON. . . ."

Odysseus is found by the daughter of Alcinous, king of the Phaeacians. That evening he is a guest at court (Books 6–8).

To the ancient people of Greece and Asia Minor, all guests were godsent. They had to be treated with great courtesy before they could be asked to identify themselves and state their business. That night, at the banquet, the stranger who was washed up on the beach is seated in the guest’s place of honor. A minstrel, or singer, is called, and the mystery guest gives him a gift of pork, crisp with fat, and requests a song about Troy. In effect, Odysseus is asking for a song about himself.

Odysseus weeps as the minstrel’s song reminds him of all his companions, who will never see their homes again. Now Odysseus is asked by the king to identify himself. It is here that he begins the story of his journey.

Now this was the reply Odysseus made: . . .

"I am Laertes’ son, Odysseus. Men hold me formidably for guile in peace and war: this fame has gone abroad to the sky’s rim. My home is on the peaked seaward of Ithaca under Mount Nelson’s windblown robe of leaves, in sight of other islands—Oeussia, Same, wooded Zakynthos—Ithaca being most lofty in that coastal sea, and northwest, while the rest lie east and south. A rocky isle, but good for a boy’s training; I shall not see on earth a place more dear, though I have been detained long by Calypso, loveliest among goddesses, who held me in her smooth coves, to be her heart’s delight, as Circe of Aeaea, the enchantress, desired me, and detained me in her hall. But in my heart I never gave consent. Where shall a man find sweetness to surpass his own home and his parents? In far lands he shall not, though he find a house of gold. What of my sailing, then, from Troy?"

What of those years of rough adventure, weathered under Zeus? Vocabulary

formidable (for’m-a-da-bal) adj.: awe-inspiring by reason of excellence; strikingly impressive.

The wind that carried west from Ilium brought me to Ithaca, on the far shore, a stronghold on the coast of the Cicones. I stormed that place and killed the men who fought. Plunder we took, and we enslaved the women, to make division, equal shares to all—but on the spot I told them: ‘Back, and quickly! Out to sea again!’ My men were mutinous, fools, on stores of wine. Sheep after sheep they butchered by the surf, and shambling cattle, feasting—while fugitives went inland, running to call to arms the main force of Cicones.

This was an army, trained to fight on horseback or, where the ground required, on foot. They came with dawn over that terrain like the leaves and blades of spring. So doom appeared to us, dark word of Zeus for us, our evil days. My men stood up and made a fight of it— backed on the ships, with lances kept in play, from bright morning through the blaze of noon holding our beach, although so far outnumbered, but when the sun passed toward setting time, then the Achaeans, one by one, gave way. Six benches were left empty in every ship that evening when we pulled away from death. And this new grief we bore with us to sea: our precious lives we had, but not our friends. No ship made sail next day until some shipmate had raised a cry, three times, for each poor ghost unshipped by the Cicones on that field. Now Zeus the lord of cloud roused in the north a storm against the ships, and driving veils of squall moved down like night on land and sea. The bows went plunging at the gust; sails cracked and lashed out strips in the big wind. We saw death in that fury, dropped the yards, unshipped the oars, and pulled for the nearest lee then two long days and nights we lay offshore worn out and sick at heart, tasting our grief, until a third Dawn came with ringlets shining. Then we put up our masts, hauled sail, and rested, letting the steersmen and the breeze take over.

130. Ilium (i-’li-um): another name for Troy.

150. Ilium (i-’lu-um): another name for Troy.

155. Out to sea again! My men were mutinous, fools, on stores of wine. Sheep after sheep they butchered by the surf, and shambiling cattle, feasting—while fugitives went inland, running to call to arms the main force of Cicones. This was an army, trained to fight on horseback or, where the ground required, on foot. They came with dawn over that terrain like the leaves and blades of spring. So doom appeared to us, dark word of Zeus for us, our evil days.

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