

[Least Tern](#) > [English Classroom](#) > [Odyssey Guide](#)

The Odyssey

Book 17 ~ Study Guide

from John McIlvain

[An Overview for the Student](#)

[Book-by-Book Study Guide](#)

[Literary Responses to the Odyssey](#)



Image source: http://www.beloit.edu/~classics/main/courses/classics100/museum2/art_museum2.html

Note: This site is designed to be used with Robert Fagles' translation of the *Odyssey*, published by Penguin USA. It was prepared for a 9th grade English class.

Books:

[1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) [7](#) [8](#) [9](#) [10](#) [11](#) [12](#) [13](#) [14](#) [15](#) [16](#) [17](#) [18](#) [19](#) [20](#) [21](#) [22](#) [23](#) [24](#)

STRANGER AT THE GATES

SCENE: Ithaca

IMPORTANT CHARACTERS: Odysseus, Telemachus, Eurycleia, Penelope, Piraeus, Theoclymenus, Eumaeus, Melanthius, Phemius, Argos, Antinous.

A "strong" Telemachus, upon whom Athena has "lavished a marvelous splendor," returns home and stemming sentiment instructs his mother to go her own room and pray for success; he leaves to rendezvous with Theoclymenus who is with Piraeus. Telemachus tells Piraeus, who has hidden the hoard Menelaus had sent off with Telemachus, to keep it to ensure it stay out of the suitor's hands. When Telemachus returns again to the palace with Theoclymenus, he tells Penelope the story of his time with Menelaus (quoting the latter's prediction of how Odysseus would treat the suitors) but denies knowing of Odysseus whereabouts. This is left instead to Theoclymenus who "sees" the truth. Meanwhile Odysseus (as a beggar) and Eumaeus begin their journey toward town. On the way Odysseus is taunted by his old goatherd. At the gate he is recognized by his ancient dog who is in terrible conditions but dies comforted. Inside the beggar is scorned by the suitor Antinous whose behavior is so inhospitable that the other suitors chastise him. Eumaeus tells the beggar he is summoned by the queen. The beggar says he will wait until dark. As the sun goes down, the

suitors are in a festive mood

PAY ATTENTION TO:

- Telemachus' resolve with Penelope;
- Telemachus' "true" story ("I'll not deceive you ever.");
- Theoclymenus' prophecy;
- the taunting of Odysseus by the goatherd Melanthius;
- Odysseus' self-control;
- the recognition by Argos;
- the lack of hospitality;
- Odysseus' encounter with Antinous – Antinous insulting the stranger and the reactions to this;
- Eumaeus' messages from Penelope to the stranger and back again.

EPITHET: Who is... "The man who'd borne long years abroad?"

QUESTIONS:

1. Why compare Penelope to "Artemis or golden Aphrodite" when she comes down the stairs?
2. What does Telemachus leave out of his "true" story when he talks to Penelope; what does he leave in? How does Theoclymenus contribute to the scene?
3. Where has Argos been lying in the absence of his master?
4. What is Odysseus' reaction to seeing Argos?
5. How does Odysseus handle his "humiliation"? Does he seem more at ease with it than Eumaeus and Telemachus? If so, why?
6. Who throws a footstool at Odysseus? Why do even the other suitors take exception to this?
7. Why does Penelope want to talk to the stranger?

QUOTATIONS TO REMEMBER:

At that Telemachus strode down through the farm (30)
in quick, firm strides, brooding death for the suitors.

"Weak as the doe that beds down her fawns (135)
in a mighty lions den - her newborn sucklings -
then trails off to the mountain spurs and grassy bends
to graze her fill, but back the lion comes to his own lair
and the master deals both fawns a ghastly, bloody death,
just what Odysseus will deal that mob - ghastly death."
(*This is Telemachus quoting Menelaus (see Book 4, line 374)*)

Wild reckless taunts – and just as he passed Odysseus (254)
the idiot lurched out with a heel and kicked his hip
but he couldn't knock the beggar off the path
he stood his ground so staunchly Odysseus was torn . . .
He steeled himself . . . his mind in full control.

"Listen to him . . . (271)
All bark and no bite from the vicious mutt." (*this is referring to Melanthius not Argos!*)

". . . you'd be amazed to see such speed, such strength. (347)
No quarry that he chased in the deepest, darkest woods
could ever slip this hound." (*this is referring to Argos!*)

But the dark shadow of death closed down on Argos' eyes (359)
the instant he saw Odysseus, twenty years away.

Right behind him (*Eumaeus*) came Odysseus, into his own house, (369)
looking for all the world like an old and broken beggar
hunched on a stick, his body wrapped in shameful rags.

"Good God Almighty," Antinous cut the beggar short, (492)
"What spirit brought this pest to plague our feast??"

"But if beggars have their gods and Furies, too, (524)
Let Antinous meet his death before he meets his bride!"

. . . the rest were outraged, even those brash suitors. (529)
One would say to another, "Look, Antinous,
that was a crime, to strike the luckless beggar!"

"Nobody's fool that stranger," wise Penelope said, (653)
"he sees how things could go. Surely no men on earth
can match that gang for deadly, restless scheming."

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