

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

The Odyssey

Book 18 ~ 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](#)

THE BEGGAR-KING OF ITHACA

SCENE: Ithaca

IMPORTANT CHARACTERS: Odysseus, Irus (Arnaeus), Amphinomus, Penelope, Telemachus, Eurymachus, Antinous, Eurynome, and Melanthis.

Odysseus is challenged by the resident beggar Irus who comes to have second thoughts about the wisdom of a proposed match against Odysseus. However, the suitors, especially Antinous, think the contest will be good sport. It is short lived, though Odysseus chooses to deliver only a glancing blow and then, to the laughter of the audience, haul his victim across the yard to the outer gate. Afterwards he warns the kindest suitor Amphinomus that it might be a good idea to be elsewhere in the future, but even though Amphinomus grows "grave with forebodings" he will not escape his fate. At the point in time, Athena inspires Penelope to both tempt and chastise the suitors, and to embolden Telemachus. Penelope notes that the tradition for suitors is to provide not to pillage. Just as Penelope criticizes the suitors, Odysseus criticizes the maids who have slept with them. For this he is tongue-lashed by Melanthis, one of the maids, who he in turn threatens to turn into Telemachus. Later, after a debate with Eurymachus, Odysseus avoids a thrown stool which hits the wine steward. The suitors complain that the beggar has ruined everything, but a

bold Telemachus sends them out of the hall.

PAY ATTENTION TO:

- Odysseus being insulted by Irus and his response;
- Odysseus' caution to Amphinomus;
- Penelope's appearance before the suitors;
- Melanthe's mockery of Odysseus;
- Odysseus' verbal duel with Eurymachus;
- Odysseus' self-control;
- the strength of Telemachus.

EPITHETS:

- Descriptors for Penelope: wary, poised, discreet, wise;
- Descriptors for Odysseus: foxy veteran, seasoned fighter, the one who knew the world, staunch, master of many exploits

QUESTIONS:

1. Why does Irus quarrel with "the stranger?"
2. What is Antinous' reaction to the unfriendly words Irus speaks to Odysseus?
3. What is the prize for the beggar who wins the fight?
4. Has Telemachus fully reached manhood yet? Why is this important? What is the symbol of manhood?
5. Who is Penelope's father?
6. What is the implication of the maids' inappropriate behavior?

QUOTATIONS TO REMEMBER:

"If that old relic whips you and wins the day (96)
I'll toss you into a black ship and sail you off
to Echetus the mainland kind who wrecks all men alive!
He'll lop you nose and ears with his ruthless blade,
he'll rip your privates out by the roots, he will,
and serve them up to his doge who'll bolt them raw!"

As he mulled things over, that way seemed best, (106)
a glancing blow, the suitors would not detect him.

"Amphinomus, you seem a man of good sense to me (145)
I, too, seemed destined to be a man of fortune once
Look at me now.
And so, I say, let no man be lawless all his life
just take in peace what gifts the gods will send

I say [Odysseus] is right at hand - and may some power save you, (167)
spirit you home before you meet him face to face
the moment he returns to native ground."

. . . . but not even so could he escape his fate. (177)
Even then Athena had bound him fast to death
at the hands of Prince Telemachus and his spear.

But now the goddess Athena with her glinting eyes (180)
 inspired Penelope, Icarius' daughter, wary, poised,
 to display herself to her suitors, fan their hearts.

"Eurynome," discreet Penelope objected, (201)
 "don't try to coax me . . .
 Whatever glow I had dies long ago . . .
 The gods of Olympus snuffed it out that day
 my husband sailed away in the hollow ships."

[Athena] made her taller in all men's eyes, (222)
 her skin whiter than ivory freshly carved . . .

"Ah what a marvelous gentle sleep enfolding me (228)
 in the midst of all my anguish! Now,
 if only blessed Artemis sent me a death as gentle, now
 this instant.

"Odysseus - if he could return to tend my life (285)
 the renown I had would only grow in glory . . .

'But once you see the beard on the boy's cheek, (303)
 you wed the man you like and leave the house behind.'
 So my husband advised me then. Now it all comes true . . .
 a night will come when a hateful marriage falls my lot -
 this cursed life of mine! Zeus has torn away my joy.
 But there's something else that mortifies me now.
 Your way is a far cry from the time-honored way
 of suitors
 They bring their own calves and lambs"

Staunch Odysseus glowed with joy to hear all this - (316)
 his wife's trickery luring gifts from her suitors now,
 enchanting their hearts with suave seductive words,
 but all the while with something else in mind.

Flushed with beauty, Melanthe mocked him shamelessly . . . (363)

"You (Melanthe) wait, (380)
 you bitch."

His fury sent the woman fluttering off, scattering (384)
 down the hall with panic shaking every limb.

"Ah, Eurymachus . . . if only the two of us could go (414)
 man to man in the labors of the field.

At last Amphinomus rose to take the floor . . . (467)
 "Fair enough, when a man speaks well
 we have no grounds for wrangling, no cause for abuse.
 Hands off the stranger!"

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