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The Odyssey

Book 19 ~ Study Guide

from John McIlvain

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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.

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PENELOPE AND HER GUEST

SCENE: Ithaca

IMPORTANT CHARACTERS: Odysseus, Telemachus, Eurycleia, Penelope, Eurynome.

After Odysseus tells Telemachus to put away all the weapons lying about the palace, he goes to Penelope who chastises Melanthe for criticizing him again. She tells Odysseus how she longs for her husband, and asks for his (the beggar's) story. Odysseus invents still another self (different from the one he told Eumaeus of). The tale's feature is a claim that he knew Odysseus, something he convinces Penelope of when he describes what the hero wore when he had been his host twenty years before. He predicts, but does not convince her, that Odysseus will return. She calls him "friend," saying that "any man you meet would call you blest"; she tells the women to wash him and offers him "bedding, blankets, and lustrous spreads" that he declines as not his style. After Eurycleia notes his resemblance to his old master, she discovers that it is him when she recognizes a scar on his leg while washing it. The narration is interrupted by the adventure the young Odysseus had when a boar had gored his leg. When we return to the scene, the nurse is trying to signal Penelope of her discovery. A stern Odysseus commands Eurycleia to say nothing. The chapter closes with Penelope describing a dream which Odysseus interprets as signaling his return. Unconvinced, she says

that it is time to have the contest to see which of the suitors can string Odysseus' bow and shoot an arrow through a dozen lined up axes; only for that man will she forsake her palace. Odysseus in turn tells her not to put off the contest. "Before that crew can handle the polished bow . . . Odysseus, man of exploits, will be home for you."

PAY ATTENTION TO:

- the interaction of Odysseus and Penelope;
- the continuing development of Penelope as a character;
- the recognition by Eurycleia;
- the story behind the scar;
- the plan to test the suitors' abilities.

EPITHETS:

- More descriptors for Penelope: alert, observant, wise, reserved, discreet, seasoned.
- More descriptors for Odysseus: the old soldier, old trooper, master of craft, master improviser, great master of subtlety, wily, cool tactician, man of exploits.

QUESTIONS:

1. What ruse does Odysseus tell Telemachus to carry out at the beginning of the book?
2. What does the stranger ask Penelope not to ask him? Why? Does she ask him anyway?
3. Where does Odysseus tell Penelope he is from? Does this story have anything in common with the story he tells Eumaeus?
4. How does Penelope react to what she hears of Odysseus? How does Odysseus react to her reaction?
5. What prediction does Odysseus give to Penelope?
6. How did Odysseus obtain the scar that Eurycleia recognizes?
7. What does Odysseus say to Eurycleia?
8. What is the dream which Penelope describes to Odysseus? How does he interpret it?
9. How does the stranger affect Penelope? Why is she favorably disposed toward the stranger?
10. How does Penelope plan to test the suitors to see which one she will marry?

QUOTATIONS TO REMEMBER

"Surely a god is here - (42)
one of those who rule the vaulting skies."

"Quiet," his father, the old soldier warned him.
"Get a grip on yourself. No more questions now."

. . . alert Penelope (97)
wheeled on the maiden (Melantho) and tongue-lashed her smartly
"Make no mistake . . . you will pay with your life, you will."

" . . . whatever form and feature I had, what praise I'd won, (138)
the deathless gods destroyed that day the Achaeans
sailed away for Troy, my husband in their ships,
Odysseus - if he could return to tend my life
the renown I had would only grow in glory.
Now my life is torment . . ."

"Three whole years (169)
I deceived them blind, seduced them with this scheme . . ."

Then, thanks to my maids - the shameless, reckless creatures -
the suitors caught me in the act, denounced me harshly,
So I finished it off. Against my will. They forced me.
And now I can't escape a marriage, nor can I contrive
a deft way out. My parents urge me to tie the knot
and my son is galled as they squander his estate -
he sees it all. he is a grown man by now, equipped
to tend his own royal house and tend it well."

"Now stranger, I think I'll test you, just to see (248)
if there in your house, with all his friends-in-arms,
you actually entertained my husband as you say."

"King Odysseus . . . (259)
he was wearing a heavy woolen cape, sea purple
in double folds, with a golden brooch to clasp it"

His (Odysseus' words) renewed her deep desire to weep . . ." (285)

"I swear by Zeus, the first, the greatest god - (349)
all will come to pass, I swear, exactly as I say.
True, this very month - just as the old moon dies
and the new moon rises into life - Odysseus will return!"

in a flash she new the scar - (445)
that old wound
made years ago by a boars white tusk when Odysseus
went to Parnassus, out to see Autolycus and his sons . . .

Odysseus rushed him first, (516)
shaking his long spear in his sturdy hand,
wild to strike but the boar struck faster,
lunging in on a slant, a tusk thrusting up
over the boys knees, gouging a deep strip of flesh
but it never hit the bone -
Odysseus thrust and struck,
stabbing the beasts right shoulder -

"Nurse, you want to kill me? . . . (545)
quiet, not a word to anyone in the house
Or else. I warn you - and I mean business, too. . .
Just be quiet. Keep your tails to yourself.
Leave the rest to the gods."
Hushed so,
the old nurse went padding down the halls
to fetch more water - her basin had all spilled -

"When night falls . . . I may go mad with grief. (582)
Like Pandareus' daughter, the nightingale in the green woods
lifting her lovely song at the first warm rush of spring,
perched in the treetops' rustling leaves and pouring forth
her music, shifting, trilling, and sinking, rippling high to burst
in grief for Itylus, her beloved boy, King Zethus' son
whom she in innocence once cut down with bronze -

