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The Odyssey

Book 20 ~ 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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PORTENTS GATHER

SCENE: Ithaca

IMPORTANT CHARACTERS: Odysseus, Athena, Penelope, Telemachus, Eurycleia, Melanthius, Philoetius (the cowherd), Antinous, Theoclymenus (the seer), Eurymachus, and Ctesippus, a suitor who abuses Odysseus.

Odysseus spends a restless night, his anger stoked as he hears the maids slipping from the house to sleep with the suitors. Restrained by Athena who chides him for not appreciating all he has (wife, son, palace), he questions his ability to regain it all. She scolds him for his lack of faith in her and "showers sleep across his eyes." Penelope is also having a restless night, feeling desperate though cheered by a dream that Odysseus lay beside her. When Odysseus awakes, he prays for a sign from Zeus and has his prayer answered with a thunderbolt. Odysseus has a nasty encounter with Melanthius, the goatherd, but is encouraged by loyalty of the cowherd Philoetius. The suitors have spawned a plan to kill Telemachus, but a sign from an eagle and some words from Amphinous deflects them. They gather to feast and abuse the beggar. Telemachus dresses the worst offender down. At the feast, the suitors break into grotesque laughter, even after Theoclymenus predicts their doom.

PAY ATTENTION TO:

- Odysseus' "seething anger";
- the behavior of the maids;
- his self-control;
- Penelope's prayer;
- Zeus' omen; Melanthius' continuing abusiveness contrasted with the cowherd's talk with the beggar;
- the cowherd's affection for Odysseus;
- Telemachus' behavior - all of which suggests he has become a man;
- Athena's role;
- the prophecy of Theoclymenus;
- the "manic" behavior of the suitors.

QUESTIONS:

1. What does Athena do in this book to boost Odysseus' spirits? To test them?
2. Why are the stranger's interactions with Melanthius and Philoetius placed one after the other?
3. What does Philoetius have in common with Melanthius and Eumaeus?
4. How is Odysseus insulted by Cteppis? How does Odysseus react? Telemachus?
5. Why do the suitors behave even more inappropriately than usual?
6. What is Penelope doing at the end of the book?

QUOTATIONS TO REMEMBER:

The heart inside in growled low with rage, (15)
as a bitch mounting over her weak defenseless puppies
growls, facing a stranger, bristling for a showdown -
so he growled from his depths, hackles rising at their outrage.
But he struck his chest and curbed his fighting heart:
Bear up old heart! You've borne worse, far worse . . ."

"What if I kill them - thanks to you and Zeus - (44)
how do I run away from their avengers?
Show me the way, I ask you."
"Impossible man!"
Athena bantered, the godless' eyes ablaze.
Others are quick to trust a weaker comrade . . .
But I am a goddess . . ."

[Penelope] "Artemis with your glossy braids, come shoot me dead - (89)
so I can plunge beneath this loathsome earth
with the image of Odysseus vivid in my mind."

[Odysseus] "Father Zeus . . . show me a sign . . ." (109)

And Zeus in all his wisdom heard that prayer. (114)
He thundered at once, out of the clear blue heavens
high above the clouds, and Odysseus' spirit listened.

Third to arrive was Philotetius, that good cowherd . . . (203)
he walked up to Odysseus, gave him his right hand
and winged a greeting, "Cheers old friend, old father -
here's to your luck, great days from this day on . . ."

It's unbearable here.
True, but I still dream of my old master . . ."

suddenly, banking high on the left (269)
an omen flew past, clutching a trembling dove.
And Amphinomus rose in haste to warn them all,
"My friends we'll never carry off this plot
to kill the prince. Let's concentrate on feasting."

On that note, (333)
grabbing an oxhoof out of a basket where it lay,
with a brawny hand he (Ctesippus) flung it straight at the king –
but Odysseus ducked his head a little, ducking the blow
and seething just as the oxhoof hit the solid wall
he clenched his teeth in a wry sardonic grin.

But Athena had no mind to let the brazen suitors (316)
hold back now from their heart rending insults -
she meant to let the anguish cut still deeper
into the core of Laertes' son Odysseus.

But I (Telemachus) shrink from driving mother from our house (382)
issuing harsh commands against her will.
God forbid it ever comes to that!"

So he vowed
and Athena set off uncontrollable laughter in the suitors,
crazed them out of their minds - mad, hysterical laughter
seemed to break from the jaws of strangers, not their own,
and the meat they were eating oozed red with blood -
tears flooded their eyes, hearts possessed by grief.
The inspired seer Theoclymenus wailed out in their midst,
"Poor men, what terror is this that overwhelms you so?
Night shrouds your heads, your faces down to your knees -
cries of mourning are bursting into fire - cheeks rivering tears -
the walls and the handsome crossbeams dripping dank with blood!
Ghosts, look, thronging the entrance, thronging the court,
go trooping down to the world of death and darkness!
The sun is blotted out of the sky - look there -
a lethal mist spreads all across the earth!"

At that
they all broke into peals of laughter aimed at the seer -
Polybus' son Eurymachus braying first and foremost . . ."

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