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The Odyssey

Book 21 ~ 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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ODYSSEUS STRINGS HIS BOW

SCENE: Ithaca

IMPORTANT CHARACTERS: Athena, Penelope, Eumaeus, Odysseus, Antinous, Telemachus, Philoetius, Eumaeus, Melanthius, Eurymachus, Eurycleia.

In a scene that in its quietness contrasts with everything that is to follow in Books 21 and 22, Penelope goes to retrieve Odysseus' legendary bow. After Telemachus sets out the axes (no one quite knows how this worked), he is the first to try to string the bow. It seems he will succeed on his fourth try, but Odysseus signals him not to. A number of suitors, the last being Eurymachus, then also try and fail, after which Antinous suggests that they should continue this contest on another day. Meanwhile Odysseus has slipped away and he reveals his identity to the two faithful herdsmen. When it looks like the contest will be postponed, the beggar indicates he would like to try his hand. He is mocked by Antinous who is chastised by Penelope. In turn, Telemachus sends her to her quarters. After the bow is given to Odysseus by a mocked Eumaeus, Odysseus effortlessly strings the bow and sends an arrow through the axes.

PAY ATTENTION TO:

- Penelope as she leads up to announcing the contest, especially her emotions as she removes the bow from its hiding place;
- Telemachus' attempt to string the bow;
- Odysseus' shaking his head ("no");
- Odysseus slipping out of the hall during the contest;
- his revealing of his identity to the cowherd (Philoetius) and the swineherd (Eumaeus);
- Antinous' proposal after Eurymachus fails to string the bow;
- Odysseus counter-proposal;
- Antinous' reaction ("Not a shred of sense in your head, you filthy drifter");
- Penelope's reaction to Antinous;
- Telemachus' sending her back to her quarters:
- Eumaeus taking the bow to Odysseus;
- the mockery of the suitors toward both Eumaeus and Telemachus;
- Odysseus stringing the bow.

QUESTIONS:

1. What must the stringer of the bow do with his shot?
2. In what way do Telemachus' words after "giving up" show him to be a worthy son?
3. What is Antinous' and Eurymachus' reaction to the challenge?
4. Melanthius is ordered to do what in order to make the bow easier to bend?
5. How does Odysseus prove his identity to the cowherd and the swineherd?
6. What is the purpose of the "biography" of the bow?
7. Penelope's taking the bow from its hiding place is one of the most moving moments in this part of the poem – why?

Commentary from the translator, Robert Fagles: "In many ways one of the most moving moments in the poem for me is when Odysseus strings his bow at the end of the 21st book. The simile for stringing the bow describes the hero as 'an expert singer skilled at lyre and song' who tunes his harp to a new pitch. That means the bow, the killing instrument, is really a musical instrument at the same time. Story-telling at that point becomes action.

"It's as though Homer were taking his whole narrative art and conferring it upon his hero and saying, all right, take your bow and treat it as a lyre and play a new song. With that lyre-bow Odysseus recomposes his kingdom; he rids it of discordant elements--the suitors--and establishes a new era of harmony. The storytelling image and the whole activity of heroism come together and are one and the same."

(<http://www.princeton.edu/pr/news/96/q4/1114fagl.html>)

QUOTATIONS TO REMEMBER

She stepped onto a plank where chests stood tall, (60)
brimming with clothing scented sweet with cedar.
Reaching, tiptoe lifting the bow off its peg,
still secure in the burnished case that held it,
down she sank, laying the case across her knees,
and dissolved in tears with a high thin wail
as she drew her husband's weapon from its sheath . . .
Then, having wept and sobbed to her heart's content,
off she went to the hall to meet her proud admirers,
cradling her husband's backsprung bow in her arms,
its quiver bristling arrows, shafts of pain

"So to arms my gallants! (84)

Here is the prize at issue, right before you now!
The hand that can string this bow with greatest ease,
that shoots an arrow through all twelve axes –
he is the man I follow, yes, forsaking this house
where I was once a bride, this gracious house
so filled with the best that life can offer –
I shall always remember it, that I know . . .
even in my dreams."

(note the last seven lines are identical to the words Penelope speaks beginning on line 649 in Book 19)

. . . and now, struggling with all his might for the fourth time, (146)
he would have strung the bow, but Odysseus shook him off.
"God help me," the inspired prince cried out,
"must I be a weakling, a failure all my life?"

With that (257)

pushing back his rags, he revealed the great scar . . .
And then the men gazed at it, scanned it, knew it well,
broke into tears and threw their arms around their master.

"Listen to me, you me who court the queen, (307)
I have to say what the heart inside me urges.
I appeal especially to Eurymachus, and you,
brilliant Antinous, who spoke so shrewdly now.
Give the bow a rest for today, leave it to the gods –
at dawn the Archer God will grant a victory
to the man he favors most.

For the moment,
give me the polished bow now, won't you? So,
to amuse you now I can try my hand, my strength . . .
is the old force inside the gnarled limbs?"

"Antinous," watchful Penelope stepped in, (350)
"how impolite it would be, how wrong, to scant
whichever guest Telemachus welcome to his house.
You really think if the stranger . . . strings the bow,
he'll take me home and claim me as his bride?
He'd never dream of such a thing, I'm sure."

"So Mother, (389)
go back to your quarters, tend to your own tasks,
the distaff and the loom, and keep the women
working hard as well. As for the bow now,
men will see to that, but I most of all,
I hold the reign of power in this house."

Astonished,
she took to her own room. She took to heart
the clear good sense of what her son had said.
Climbing up to the lofty chamber with her women
she fell to weeping for Odysseus, her beloved husband
till watchful Athena sealed her eyes with welcome sleep.

(note: these lines, except to the bow reference, are identical to those in Book I, lines 409-420)

So they mocked, but Odysseus, mastermind in action, (451)
once he'd handled the great bow and scanned every inch,
then, like an expert singer skilled at lyre and song--
who strains a string to a new peg with ease,
making the pliant sheep-gut fast at either end--
so with his virtuoso ease Odysseus strung his mighty bow.
Quickly his right hand plucked the string to test its pitch
and under his touch it sang out clear and sharp as a swallow's cry.

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