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The Odyssey

Book 23 ~ 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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THE GREAT ROOTED BED

SCENE: Ithaca

IMPORTANT CHARACTERS: Odysseus, Penelope, Eurycleia, Telemachus, Athena

Penelope cannot believe Odysseus had returned. Odysseus, worried that the suitors' relatives will seek vengeance, tells Telemachus that there should be a festive air in the court so that the Ithacans think Penelope has finally agreed to a marriage. The reunion of Penelope and Odysseus features Penelope's "testing" of Odysseus, something he, who has been testing her and virtually everyone he had met since arriving at Ithaca, seems to understand better than anyone else. Odysseus finally convinces Penelope that he is Odysseus when she implies the bed, whose construction he alone knew, could be moved. Odysseus, a master carpenter (making the raft in Book 5 was not a challenge) had made it from a still rooted olive tree. After an emotional reunion, Odysseus speaks of his one remaining chore – planting the oar inland in honor of Poseidon. As the beggar, he had already told her of some of Odysseus' adventures, now he tells all, including the interlude with Calypso that he had left out before, in 33 lines! Their reunion is blessed by Athena who arranges to stay the dawn so their first night together again may be prolonged.

PAY ATTENTION TO:

- The interaction of Penelope and Eurycleia;
- Penelope's "hardness";
- Penelope's test of Odysseus;
- the story of the bed;
- Odysseus' reaction to the test;
- Odysseus' shorter" version of his adventures;
- the ritual and consummation of their reunion and Athena's "gift."

QUESTIONS:

1. What do Penelope and Eurycleia argue about at the beginning of Bk. 23?
2. Why is Telemachus irritated at his mother?
3. What (who) does Penelope believe caused the deaths of the suitors?
4. What future problems does Odysseus see as a result of the killing of the suitors?
5. What does Odysseus want those outside his palace believe is happening within the palace?
6. Where does Penelope order Eurycleia to make up the bed? How does Odysseus react to this?
7. Who made the bed and what is remarkable about it?
8. What reason does Penelope give for not recognizing Odysseus earlier?
9. Who made Helen act as she had according to Penelope?
10. Who is responsible for holding Dawn at bay while Penelope and Odysseus spend their first night together?
11. What does Odysseus tell Penelope about his next journey?
12. Where is Odysseus headed at the end of the book?

QUOTATIONS TO REMEMBER:

"Dear old nurse, wary Penelope replied, (11)
The gods have made you mad."

"Dear old nurse," Composed Penelope responded, (90)
deep as you are, my friend, you'll find it hard
to plumb the pans of the everlasting gods.
All the same, let's go and join my son
so I can see the suitors lying dead
an see . . . the one who killed them."

With that thought
Penelope started down from her lofty room, her heart
in turmoil, torn . . . should she keep her distance,
probe her husband, or rush up to the man at once
and kiss his head and cling to both his hands? . . .
A long while she sat in silence . . . numbing wonder
filled her hear as her eyes explored his face.

"Oh mother," Telemachus reproached her, (111)
"cruel mother, you with you hard heart . . .
What other wife could have a spirit so unbending?
Holding back from her husband after twenty years of brutal struggle . . .
your hear was always harder than iron."

". . . if he is truly Odysseus (121)
home at last, make no mistake
we two will know each other, even better –

we two have secret signs. . . .

. . . a passer-by on the road, a neighbor round about (152)
will think it's a wedding underway.
No news of the suitors' deaths must spread through town.

Putting her husband to the proof – but Odysseus (203)
blazed up in fury, lashing out at his loyal wife,
"Woman – Your words, they cut me to the core!
Who could move my bed?"

Penelope felt her knees go slack, her heart surrender, (231)
recognizing the strong, clear signs Odysseus offered.
She dissolved in tears, rushed to Odysseus, flung her arms
around his neck . . .
"The gods, it was the gods who sent us sorrow . . ."
But now, since you've revealed such overwhelming proof –
. . . you've conquered my heart, my hard heart at last.

The more she spoke, the more a deep desire for tears (259)
welled up inside his breast – he wept as he held the wife
he loved, the soul of loyalty, in his arms at last.
Joy, warm as the joy that shipwrecked sailors feel
when they catch sight of land – Poseidon has struck
their well-rigged ship on the open sea with gale winds,
and crushing walls of waves, and only a few escape, swimming,
struggling out of the frothing surf to reach the shore,
their bodies crusted with salt, but buoyed up with joy
as they plant their feet on solid ground again,
spared a deadly fate. So joyous now to her
the sight of her husband vivid in her gaze,
that her white arms, embracing his neck,
would never for a moment let him go . . .
Dawn with her rose-red fingers might have shone
upon their tears,, if with her glinting eyes
Athena had not thought of one more thing.

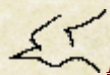
. . . he told how he reached (375)
Ogygia's shores, the nymph Calypso held him back,
cherishing him . . .
yes, but she never won the heart inside him, never . . .
. . .the Phaeacians . . .
and that was the last he told her, just as sleep
overcame him, sleep loosing his limbs,
slipping the toils of anguish from his mind.

Athena, eyes afire, had fresh plans. (388)
Once she thought he had his hearts content
of love and sleep at his wife's side, straightaway
she roused young dawn from ocean's banks . . .

"But now I must be off to the upland farm, (406)
our orchard green with trees, to see my father . . ."
"By now the daylight covered the land, but Pallas,

shrouding them all in darkness,
quickly led the four men out of town.

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