

## Test of the Great Bow

Homer- *The Odyssey*

Fitzgerald translation

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Hour: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

In Book 21, Penelope (pictured above), like many unwilling princesses of myth and fairy tale, proposes a seemingly impossible task for those who wish to marry her. By doing so, she causes the bloody events that lead to the restoration of her husband as Ithaca's leader. The test involves stringing Odysseus's huge bow, an impossible feat for anyone except Odysseus himself. Odysseus had left his bow home in Ithaca twenty years earlier.

Now, the queen reached the storeroom door and halted.  
Here was an oaken sill, cut long ago  
and sanded clean and bedded true. Foursquare  
1085 the doorjambs and the shining doors were set  
by the careful builder. Penelope untied the strap  
around the curving handle, pushed her hook  
into the slit, aimed at the bolts inside,  
and shot them back. Then came a rasping sound  
1090 as those bright doors the key had sprung gave way—  
a bellow like a bull's vaunt  
in a meadow—  
followed by her light footfall entering  
over the plank floor. Herb-scented robes  
lay there in chests, but the lady's milk-white arms  
1095 went up to lift the bow down from a peg  
in its own polished bow case.

Now, Penelope  
sank down, holding the weapon on her knees,  
and drew her husband's great bow out, and sobbed  
and bit her lip and let the salt tears flow.  
1100 Then back she went to face the crowded hall  
tremendous bow in hand, and on her shoulder hung  
the quiver spiked with coughing death. Behind, her  
maids bore a basket full of ax heads, bronze  
and iron implements for the master's game.  
1105 Thus, in her beauty she approached the suitors,  
and near a pillar of the solid roof  
she paused, her shining veil across her cheeks,  
her maids on either hand and still,  
then spoke to the banqueters:

"My lords, hear me:  
1110 suitors indeed, you recommended this house  
to feast and drink in, day and night, my husband  
being long gone, long out of mind. You found  
no justification for yourselves—none  
except your lust to marry me. Stand up, then:  
1115 we now declare a contest for that prize.  
Here is my lord Odysseus' hunting bow.  
Bend and string it if you can. Who sends an arrow  
through iron ax-helve sockets,  
twelve in line?  
I join my life with his, and leave this place, my home,  
1120 my rich and beautiful bridal house, forever  
to be remembered, though I dream it only." . . .



The test requires suitors to \_\_\_\_\_ Odysseus's bow  
and then shoot an \_\_\_\_\_ through  
\_\_\_\_\_ axe heads.

*Many of the suitors boldly try the bow, but not one man can even bend it enough to string it.*

Two men had meanwhile left the hall:  
swineherd and cowherd, in companionship,  
one downcast as the other. But Odysseus  
followed them outdoors, outside the court,  
and coming up said gently:

“You, herdsman,  
and you, too, swineherd, I could say a thing to you,  
or should I keep it dark?”

No, no; speak,  
my heart tells me. Would you be men enough  
to stand by Odysseus if he came back?  
Suppose he dropped out of a clear sky, as I did?  
Suppose some god should bring him?  
Would you bear arms for him, or for the suitors?”

What is Odysseus testing by asking these men this question?

The cowherd said:

“Ah, let the master come!  
Father Zeus, grant our old wish! Some courier  
guide him back! Then judge what stuff is in me  
and how I manage arms!”

Likewise, Eumaeus  
fell to praying all heaven for his return,  
so that Odysseus, sure at least of these,  
told them:

“I am at home, for I am he.  
I bore adversities, but in the twentieth year  
I am ashore in my own land. I find  
the two of you, alone among my people,  
longed for my coming. Prayers I never heard  
except your own that I might come again.  
So now what is in store for you I’ll tell you:  
If Zeus brings down the suitors by my hand  
I promise marriages to both, and cattle,  
and houses built near mine. And you shall be  
brothers-in-arms of my Telemachus.

Here, let me show you something else, a sign  
that I am he, that you can trust me, look:  
this old scar from the tusk wound that I got  
boar hunting on Parnassus— . . .”

Shifting his rags

1155 he bared the long gash. Both men looked, and knew  
and threw their arms around the old soldier, weeping,  
kissing his head and shoulders. He as well  
took each man’s head and hands to kiss, then said—  
to cut it short, else they might weep till dark—

1160 “Break off, no more of this.  
Anyone at the door could see and tell them.  
Drift back in, but separately at intervals

Now that Odysseus knows he can trust these men, he  
reveals his \_\_\_\_\_.

Why might he need to reveal his identity to people  
other than Telemachus? (Hint: Odysseus is a strategist)

after me.

Now listen to your orders:

when the time comes, those gentlemen, to a man,  
1165 will be dead against giving me bow or quiver.  
Defy them. Eumaeus, bring the bow  
and put it in my hands there at the door.  
Tell the women to lock their own door tight.  
Tell them if someone hears the shock of arms  
1170 or groans of men, in hall or court, not one  
must show her face, but keep still at her weaving.  
Philoeteus, run to the outer gate and lock it.  
Throw the crossbar and lash it.” . . .

Why would the men be against giving Odysseus (disguised as a beggar) the bow and arrow?

Why does Odysseus instruct these men to lock the women out of the great hall?

*Now, Odysseus, still in his beggar's clothes, asks to try the bow. The suitors refuse to allow a mere beggar to try where they have failed, but Penelope insists that the stranger be given his chance. The suspense is very great—by this act, Penelope has accepted her husband as a suitor.*

*Eumaeus, the swineherd, hands Odysseus the bow and tells the nurse to retire with Penelope and the maids to the family chambers and to bolt the doors. **Odysseus had earlier told Telemachus to remove the suitors' weapons from the great hall.** Now he takes the bow.*

And Odysseus took his time,  
1175 turning the bow, tapping it, every inch,  
for borings that termites might have made  
while the master of the weapon was abroad.  
The suitors were now watching him, and some  
jested among themselves:

“May his fortune grow an inch for every inch he bends it!”

1180 “Maybe he has one like it  
at home!”

“Or has an itch to make one for himself?”

“See how he handles it, the sly old buzzard!”

And one disdainful suitor added this:

“A bow lover!”

“Dealer in old bows!”

1185 But the man skilled in all ways of contending,  
satisfied by the great bow's look and heft,  
like a musician, like a harper, when  
with quiet hand upon his instrument  
he draws between his thumb and forefinger  
1190 a sweet new string upon a peg: so effortlessly  
Odysseus in one motion strung the bow.  
Then slid his right hand down the cord and plucked it,  
so the taut gut vibrating hummed and sang  
a swallow's note.

The suitors have \_\_\_\_\_  
Odysseus because they believe he is just a  
\_\_\_\_\_.

How might the suitors be feeling as they watch this man easily string the bow that they were all unable to string?

In the hushed hall it smote the suitors  
1195 and all their faces changed. Then Zeus thundered  
overhead, one loud crack for a sign.

**And Odysseus laughed within him that the son  
of crooked-minded Cronus,  
had flung that omen down.**

He picked one ready arrow from his table  
1200 where it lay bare: the rest were waiting still  
in the quiver for the young men's turn to come.

He nocked  
it, let it rest across the handgrip,  
and drew the string and grooved butt of the arrow,  
aiming from where he sat upon the stool.

Now flashed an  
1205 arrow from twanging bow clean as a whistle  
through every socket ring, and grazed not one,  
to thud with heavy brazen head beyond.  
Then quietly,  
Odysseus said:

“Telemachus, the stranger  
you welcomed in your hall has not disgraced you.  
1210 I did not miss, neither did I take all day  
stringing the bow. My hand and eye are sound,  
not so contemptible as the young men say.

**The hour has come to cook their lordships' mutton—**  
supper by daylight. Other amusements later,  
1215 with song and harping that adorn a feast.”  
He dropped his eyes and nodded, and the prince  
Telemachus, true son of King Odysseus,  
belted his sword on, clapped hand to his spear,  
and with a clink and glitter of keen bronze  
1220 stood by his chair, in the forefront near his father.

From *Book 21*

According to the prophesy, what must Odysseus do now?

**It's about to go  
down...**