"Penelope" - Carol Ann Duffy

At first, I looked along the road
hoping to see him saunter home
among the olive trees,
a whistle for the dog
who mourned him with his warm head on my knees.
Six months of this
and then I noticed that whole days had passed
without my noticing.
I sorted cloth and scissors, needle, thread,

thinking to amuse myself,
but found a lifetime’s industry instead.
I sewed a girl
under a single star—cross-stitch, silver silk—
running after childhood’s bouncing ball.
I chose between three greens for the grass;
a smoky pink, a shadow’s grey
to show a snapdragon gargling a bee
I threaded walnut brown for a tree,

my thimble like an acorn
pushing up through umber soil.
Beneath the shade
I wrapped a maiden in a deep embrace
with heroism’s boy
and lost myself completely
in a wild embroidery of love, lust, lessons learnt;
then watched him sail away
into the loose gold stitching of the sun.

And when the others came to take his place,
disturb my peace,
I played for time.
I wore a widow’s face, kept my head down,
did my work by day, at night unpicked it.
I knew which hour of the dark the moon
would start to fray,
I stitched it.
Grey threads and brown
pursued my needle’s leaping fish

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to form a river that would never reach the sea.

I tried it. I was picking out

the smile of a woman at the centre

of this world, self-contained, absorbed, content,

most certainly not waiting,

when I heard a far-too-late familiar tread outside the door.

I licked my scarlet thread

and aimed it surely at the middle of the needle’s eye once more

Read the poem “Penelope” by Carol Ann Duffy. Answer the following questions on your own piece of paper that you will turn in. The responses should be between one paragraph to a multi-paragraph response. You will turn these in to the teacher.

1. How does the speaker of the poem characterize herself in the first stanza? How is her missing husband, Odysseus, characterized?

2. What changes in the speaker’s attitude in the second stanza?

3. How does figurative language contribute to the poem’s meaning? Consider the effects of the simile that begins on line 19 and the metaphor developed in lines 21-27. How literal or figurative is her “embroidery”?

4. Stanza 4 presents the suitors and Penelope’s trick. Why does the poet use sewing as a metaphor for Penelope’s thought process?

5. Why is the “familiar tread” “far-too-late” (line 43)?