Electra Study Guide

Electra by Sophocles

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Contents

Introduction

Sophocles's *Electra,* written around 409 B.C., is based on the legend of the House of Atreus, a story which contemporary Greek audiences would have known from childhood. The major themes of this story concern retribution for crimes committed within the family of Atreus, who was Electra's grandfather. Electra's duty in the play is to avenge her father's murder, but this involves killing her own mother, another crime which will have consequences down the line.

Sophocles's tragedy deals with the fate of mortals such as Electra and her brother Orestes, who act out lives which seem on the one hand to be determined by the gods, yet on the other hand are shaped by decisions made by seemingly autonomous individuals. One reason why Sophocles's plays were so successful was that he was able to articulate this complex and problematic relationship between humans and gods in a probing yet eloquent manner. His audiences responded to Electra's filial duty to avenge her father's death, for this was an honorable deed, and they were affected by the tragic consequences which it involved.

The powerful characters in *Electra* express many emotions with which Athenian audiences identified. Many of these themes still prove captivating centuries later, for they are universal human feelings of love and hate, suffering and triumph. Critics have noted that in other versions of the same story, such as Aeschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy, events are presented as the result of destiny, whereas Sophocles brings the action down to the human sphere and causes his audience to wonder at the level of responsibility which man has for his own actions.

Author Biography

Sophocles was born in Colonus, near Athens, Greece, circa 496 B.C. The'son of a prosperous family, he was well-respected in his day for his dramatic writings as well as for his civic and religious service. When Athens defeated the Persians in the naval victory at Salamis in 480 B.C., the sixteen-year-old Sophocles led an important choral performance in a ceremony celebrating the Athenian victory. A fnend of Athenian leader Pericles, he served as a general in the Samian War (440-439 B.C.). He was also a priest of the minor deity Amynos and demonstrated religious devotion by taking the sacred snake of Asclepius (the god of healing and medicine) into his house while a shrine was being prepared for it.

Sophocles studied tragedy under Aeschylus, defeating his mentor in the Great Dionysia of 468 B.C. The Dionysia were yearly festivals held in Athens in honor of the god Dionysus and featured drama competitions between rival playwrights. Sophocles won first prize in 468 B.C. with* his *Triptolemos,* one of his many lost plays, and is said to have won first prize more than twenty times at the festival. He never placed below second in these competitions, an unequaled record. Of his work which survives, there are seven complete tragedies and fragments of ninety other plays or poems; he was believed to have written one hundred and twenty-three plays in total. The best-known of his works are the plays *Antigone* (c. 442 B.C.), *Oedipus the King* (c. 430 B.C.), and *Electra* (c. 409 B.C.).

Much of Sophocles's success can be attributed to his innovations in the theater. Perhaps the most important of these modifications was the introduction of a third actor in his tragedies, which allowed for more complex dialogue and interactions between the characters. Traditionally, there had been only two actors in each episode of a play, along with the chorus. Sophocles also altered the composition of the chorus, reducing its size to fifteen members (compared to the fifty members that Aeschylus used). Additionally, he brought an element of realism to the stage itself by introducing painted scenery, addtional props, and more expressive masks (the masks were worn by actors to differentiate characters).

Sophocles died c. 406 B.C. in Athens. His death nearly coincided with the end of Athens's dominance of Greek culture, when the powerful city-state was defeated in the Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.). Indeed, his life spanned Athens's Golden Age, and his plays contributed significantly to the rich cultural life of his time. After his death, a cult was founded to honor him as a hero.

Plot Summary

The play opens at dawn in Mycenae, where Paidagogos and Orestes stand before the palace of the slain Agamemnon, discussing how best to revenge the murdered king. The god Apollo instructed Orestes to seek revenge, not by "shield nor army" but "secretly" and with his own hand. Orestes plans to have Paidagogos enter the palace carrying an funeral urn full of ashes and announce that Orestes has been killed in a chariot race.

Electra enters alone, mourning the fate of her murdered father, Agamemnon, and hoping for the arrival of her brother, Orestes, so together they can seek revenge. A Chorus of Myceneaen women enters, singing a "kommos," or song of lament. The Chorus suggests that Electra accept her fate, reminding her that the weak cannot destroy the strong and offering stoic advice to accept life's troubles—after all, everyone dies. Above all, they urge her to be reasonable, advising her: "Do not feed your frenzy."

Electra's sister Chrysothemis enters, and Electra urges her to help revenge their father's murder. Chrysothemis refuses, seeming at times both reasonable and cowardly. Chrysothemis leaves, and Electra continues her lamentation, as the Chorus continues urging her to be reasonable—though they concede the justice of her vengeful intentions.

Chrysothemis re-enters, telling Electra that when their mother's new husband, Aegisthos, returns, he plans to hide Electra away to punish her for her public mourning. Chrysothemis tells Electra about their mother's dream. Upset by the dream, Clytemnestra ordered Chrysothemis to put offerings on the grave of Agamemnon.

Clytemnestra appears and argues with Electra, attempting tojustify Agamemnon's murder, done in part to avenge the death of their daughter Iphigeneia, whom Agamemnon sacrificed to the gods. Like **her** father, however, Electra saw the sacrifice as necessary to appease the will of the gods, who would have prevented the Athenic fleet from sailing to Troy unless Iphigeneia was offered. Also, Electra asks why, if revenge for Iphigeneia was her sole motivation. Clytemnesira has married her husband's killer?

Paidagogos enters, disguised as a traveler who offers the false news of Orestes's death. Clytemnestra'!; feelings are mixed: she is sad that her child has been killed but relieved that her husband's avenger is no longer pursuing her. Electra is distraught over the news of her brother s death and again the Chorus urges acceptance. Clytemnestra is relieved she has no revenge to fear from Electra.

Chrysotherais enters, telling Electra the good news that their brother Orestes has arrived. Chrysothemis has found offerings to Agamemnon at the grave, which she assumes were left by Orestes. Electra tells her Orestes has been killed, and now they both mourn. This is tragic irony, as both mourn for Orestes who is alive and nearby.

Orestes enters, disguised as a traveler who tells Electra about Orestes's death. Overcome by his sister's outpouring of grief, however, Orestes reveals his true identity and his plan for revenge. Orestes and Paidagogos perform a ritual purification, then enter the palace, followed by Electra. The Chorus narrates the action as Clytemnestra is killed.

Aegisthos returns, happy to hear the news of Orestes's death. He enters the palace to see Orestes's body but uncovers instead the body of Clytemnestra. The play ends as Orestes leads him offstage to be killed.

Summary

Electra is a story that takes place years after the Greek ruler Agamemnon sailed to the city of Troy to help recapture his brother's wife, Helen. To buy Artemis' blessing on their voyage, Agamemnon had sacrificed a daughter, Iphigenia; he returned victorious after ten years. However, while Agamemnon was away, his wife Clytaemnestra had taken another man, Aegisthus, as her lover. When Agamemnon returned, his wife and her lover had murdered him, and as the story begins, Aegisthus rules the house.

The ancient Greek idea of justice decreed that it was the duty of a son to avenge his father's death. Electra, daughter of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, had known that her mother and Aegisthus would kill her brother, Orestes, in order to save themselves from his vengeance; Electra had therefore saved Orestes' life by placing him in the care of a faithful friend, the Tutor. Electra and her sister, Chrysothemis, have continued to live in the house under Aegisthus' rule.

As the play opens, the Tutor has brought Orestes home to fulfill his duty and avenge his father. Orestes has learned from an oracle that he must do his duty alone, and so he and the Tutor plan to pretend that Orestes has died so that they can sneak him into the house. First, though, Orestes must go to the temple of Apollo and pay tribute to his father's grave.

At the palace where Aegisthus now rules, Electra comes outside and loudly mourns her father, wondering how long she must wait to see his murder avenged. Usually Aegisthus keeps Electra imprisoned in the house, but he is away, allowing her greater freedom. The Chorus, made up of townswomen, tries to comfort Electra and encourages her to let go of her misery. Electra argues that she will only find relief when her father's killers are dead. She is unmarried and childless, she says, as her whole life has been put on hold until her brother returns to do his duty.

The Chorus sympathizes with Electra, agreeing that her father was wrongly murdered. However, they insist that her refusal to accept things as they are is the reason for her continued misery. The Chorus counsels her not to "make evil more evil still" by hanging on to the past. Electra appreciates the women's efforts and apologizes for being inconsolable, but she believes that Nature forbids her to be content until her father is avenged and honor is restored to his house. She says, though, that she has waited so long for her brother's return that she has begun to lose hope.

Electra's sister, Chrysothemis, comes outside and scolds Electra for carrying on excessively. She says that she feels just as bad as Electra does but is determined no to make a show of it, since she can't do anything about the situation. In response, Electra accuses her sister of trying to play both sides. Electra feels that Chrysothemis trades her silence for comfort and privilege, while Electra is satisfied to live on the peace of mind that comes of knowing she has been true to her duty.

The Chorus admonishes the sisters not to quarrel, saying that there is truth in what both girls say and that each could learn from the other. Chrysothemis' then states the reason she came outside; she wants to warn Electra that her mother is planning to banish her as soon as Aegisthus returns, since Electra will not keep silent. Electra claims not to care. Then, she notices that her sister is carrying something.

Chrysothemis carries libations from their mother for their father's grave. Their mother has had a frightening dream about their father, and she hopes to pacify him with tribute. This gives Electra some hope that the time has come for Orestes to return, and her tone toward her sister becomes kinder. She convinces Chrysothemis to throw away her mother's gifts and leave locks of his daughters' hair on Agamemnon's grave instead. The Chorus agrees that to do so would be more respectful to Agamemnon's memory. Chrysothemis agrees, and though she is afraid her mother will find out, she goes to do as Electra asks.

The Chorus rejoices with Electra to hear of Clytaemnestra's dream, which they interpret as a sign from Agamemnon that Justice is on the move. Clytaemnestra arrives and argues with Electra. She complains that with Aegisthus away, Electra is taking advantage of the situation and ignoring her mother's instructions to stay indoors. Clytaemnestra goes on to defend her part in her first husband's murder, which she says was revenge for his sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia. According to Clytaemnestra, justice was on her side when she killed Agamemnon.

In response to this, Electra argues that her father had accidentally angered Artemis and had no choice but to sacrifice Iphigenia. Furthermore, she argues that revenge is not reason enough for what Clytaemnestra did. Electra becomes angrier and more distraught the more she talks, to the point that the Chorus says she is so angry that she is no longer very concerned with justice.

Clytaemnestra finally stops arguing with Electra and prays to Apollo, asking that she be protected from the harm foreshadowed by her dream. The Tutor arrives then, and no one recognizes him. He pretends to be a messenger from friends of Aegisthus, coming to announce that Orestes is dead as the result of a chariot accident. Electra despairs. Her mother has a moment of shock and sorrow at the loss of another child, but she's glad to be free of the threat of Orestes' revenge. She also hopes that this will finally silence Electra. Clytaemnestra brings the Tutor into the palace as an honored guest, while Electra grieves and declares that she will never enter the palace again. She is determined to lie down at the doorway and starve to death. The Chorus sympathizes and tries to comfort her.

Suddenly, Chrysothemis rushes happily into Electra's presence with the news that Orestes is there; she has found a lock of his hair on Agamemnon's tomb. However, Electra tells her of the messenger and his sad news; the girls conclude that someone may have left a lock of hair on the tomb in honor of the lost Orestes.

Electra asks Chrysothemis to join her in killing Aegisthus, since she believes that there is now no brother to revenge their father. Chrysothemis refuses and begs Electra to

reconsider, sure that this idea will end in Electra's destruction. She promises not to repeat what Electra has said, but she hopes that Electra will learn to be prudent. The Chorus chimes in, saying, "...Prudence and caution/ Are the only things worth having in this life." Electra refuses to be guided by her sister, though, so Chrysothemis returns to the palace. The Chorus then sings a hymn of praise to Electra and her "true nobility."

Orestes arrives, attended by a friend who bears an urn that is said to contain his (Orestes') ashes. Electra does not recognize her brother, but she grieves so sorrowfully that Orestes is moved to reveal himself to her. Electra erupts with thanksgiving and joy. At this point, it is Orestes who must ask Electra to be silent, reminding her that they must continue with the pretense of his death so that he may perform his duty.

The Tutor comes outside and scolds brother and sister for putting the mission in danger with their celebrating. When Electra realizes who he is, she cries out with more joy and gratitude, but the Tutor shushes her. He wants Orestes to come inside and kill Clytaemnestra while she is relatively unguarded. Electra follows them in but then comes back out to watch for Aegisthus. Clytaemnestra's cries for mercy can be heard outdoors, but if Orestes voices any response, the audience can't hear it over Electra's angry words. Then, Clytaemnestra is dead.

Orestes comes outside, but the Chorus quickly sends him back in when they see Aegisthus coming. Aegisthus has heard news of Orestes' death, and he questions Electra. She pretends that she is now humbled and has "learned how to serve/ The will of those who have the upper hand."

At this point, the palace doors open to reveal Orestes and his attendant standing beside Clytaemnestra's covered body. Aegisthus, of course, thinks the body is that of Orestes. When he sees that it is actually his wife's body, he recognizes Orestes and begs for mercy. Electra begs that Orestes hurry and finish off Aegisthus. However, Orestes takes him in to the spot in the house where he and his wife had killed Agamemnon, so that Aegisthus may suffer the same kind of death that Agamemnon had.

In closing, the Chorus announces that the house has been set free of suffering, and that the day's work is well done.

Analysis

Electra is a Greek tragedy in one act, written by Sophocles sometime in the late 400s B.C. There are other versions of the story written by other playwrights of ancient times, but this version is the most straightforward; it simply presents the action and leaves it to the audience to decide who is right and who is wrong.

The premise of this play was probably no less shocking to its first audiences than it is to us today; the idea of a son killing his own mother is always shocking. However, the idea of restoring honor through revenge is as old as recorded history, and stories like this one show us what happens when revenge is valued as a means to restore honor. According to the Greek tradition, there is no way out of Orestes' dilemma. His duty is to

kill his father's killers; otherwise, his father's house will live in shame. The end of the play is inevitable from the beginning, and the interest of *Electra* lies not in an unpredictable plot line, but in its study of the four main characters.

The climax of this play is Orestes' killing of his mother and stepfather, but the play is named *Electra*, after the daughter rather than the son. The title choice is apt, though, because more time is spent revealing Electra's character than any other. As she is portrayed in the drama, Electra would seem to represent pure feeling; no matter what her emotions, she feels them to the maximum degree. She grieves herself sick over her father. She is ready to die when she thinks her brother is dead, and she almost foils Orestes' mission with her joyful noise at discovering he is alive.

With such strong emotions, Electra is also a person of extremes. Even the supportive Chorus comments that she could learn something from her more prudent sister. Electra reviles peace of mind in the face of her grief but later claims to *have* peace of mind, because her conscience is clean. Although she had been clever enough to send her brother away on the day of their father's death, it never occurred to her that she could have helped her brother's mission by pretending to be content while she awaited his return.

Electra's sister Chrysothemis stands in sharp contrast to the title character. Chrysothemis says that she is just as unhappy with the situation as her more vocal sister but knows that her silence allows her to live in comfort in the palace. It is important to note that Chrysothemis' silence comes not so much from prudence, as it does from denial. If she had been silent while working to do her duty to avenge her father, she might have represented a happy medium and earned her sister's respect; as it is, she represents the other extreme of Electra's emotionalism. Chrysothemis is just as incomplete as Electra, a fact that is symbolized by her unmarried status.

Though the audience sees little of Clytaemnestra, she is characterized quite fully in her limited time on stage. She is not simply an unfaithful wife who killed her husband; she had killed for revenge, just as Electra urges her brother to do. Sophocles reminds us that Clytaemnestra had killed her husband only after he had sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia to win glory in war. The Chorus humorously comments on the irony of the situation when Electra claims that her mother had no right to take revenge. In reminding us of the background to the story, Sophocles makes Clytaemnestra a much more sympathetic character than we at first might believe her to be. We also see a glimpse of her humanity when she feels a pang of regret upon hearing that Orestes is "dead," even though she knows he has been trained to kill her.

Finally, Sophocles leaves the characterization of Orestes open to the audience's interpretation. We know that he does what he has been trained to do. What we don't know is how he might feel about it. We don't know if he hesitated when his mother begged for mercy or whether he will live in anguish over his action from that moment on.

Having seen in this play that one killing always leads to another, early audiences must have found the Chorus' closing remarks somewhat ironic. Surely, we are not actually

expected to believe that the children of Agamemnon will now be free from suffering, especially in the case of the son who killed his mother to please his sister. It seems that Sophocles was determined to ensure that his audience understands that revenge can never bring real freedom; by ending the play with the Chorus' ironic remarks, he drives that point home.

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Characters

Aegisthos

Son of Thyestes, Aegisthos is Clytemnestra's former lover (and now husband) who conspired with her to murder Agamemnon.

Chorus of Mycenaean Women

The Chorus provide background information and narrates the off-stage violence. While they recognize the justice of Electra's cause, they urge her to take a stoic position. They deplore Clytemnestra's crime but advise Electra, rather than seek revenge, to leave revenge to the gods and to accept the fact that all people, being mortal, die.

Chrysothemis

Daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, Chrysothemis is the sister of Electra and Orestes. She refuses to help Electra with her planned revenge against their mother, Clytemnestra, for murdering their father. Chrysothemis urges Electra to be reasonable, though Electra accuses her sister of cowardice.

Clytemnestra

Agamemnon's wife, who, along with her lover Aegisthos, killed her husband, because of the role Agamemnon played in sacrificing their daughter, Iphigeneia.

Electra

The daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, Electra's sister is Chrysothemis and her brother is Orestes. Iphigeneia, whom her father sacrificed to the gods, was also her sister. Electra is a strong character, determined and directed, though she is incapable of heeding the moderating voice of the Chorus or the explanations of her mother. She publicly mourns her father's death and her mother's marriage to his murderer. When she believes that Orestes is dead, she mourns for him but is overjoyed to learn he is alive and participates in his revenge against Clytemnestra and Aegisthos.

Orestes

Son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, Orestes is brother to Electra and Chrysothemis. After her father's murder, Electra protected Orestes by sending him off to Phocis, where he was raised by Paidagogos. Orestes fakes his own death to gain access to the

palace, then kills his mother Clytemnestra and her husband Aegisthos. The play ends here, but according to myth, Orestes was pursued and punished by the Furies for his act of matricide.

Paidagogos Prism

A loyal friend of Agamemnon, Paidagogos hid, protected, and raised Orestes when, after his father's murder, Electra entrusted her brother into his care. Paidagogos returns to help Orestes and Electra avenge Agamemnon's murder, first pretending to be a traveler with news of Orestes's death and later helping Orestes storm the palace.

Themes

Revenge

Revenge drives all of the action in *Electra.* The family history involves a horrific crime and most of the tragedies which follow are crimes committed to compensate for an earlier crime. Agamemnon sacrifices Iphigeneia, for which Clytemnestra kills him. For her crime, Orestes kills his mother, for which he is pursued by the Furies (although this aspect of the legend is not addressed in Sophocles's drama).

Public vs. Private Life

Since tragedy, according to Aristotle's definition in his *Poetics,* involves a central figure of more than common stature, key figures are often kings or other prominent political or national figures. Consequently, this makes it possible to interpret tragedies as both explorations of private psychology and public politics. For example, William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is about murder, revenge, and madness, but it is also about the failure of proper political succession and ill-gotten power (Hamlet's uncle murders his brother the king, marries his widow, and assumes the throne, bypassing Hamlet's birthright of ascendancy). The same is true of *Electra,* where, after Agamemnon's death, his son, Orestes should have assumed the throne. The play then becomes one about the usurpation of power, and in that sense, merges public and private action.

Guilt and Innocence

The issue of guilt in *Electra* depends on the perspective from which one evaluates the actions. Is Clytemnestra guilty of murdering Agamemnon for political/romantic reasons (so she may marry Aegisthos who will assume her dead husband's monarchy) or is she simply avenging her daughter's sacrifice? Is Orestes guilty of Clytemnestra's murder for similar political reasons or is he merely executing her for murdering his father, Agamemnon? Ultimately, guilt or innocence is central to the world of Greek tragedy, where characters are destined by the gods but also act freely.

Duty and Responsibility

This theme becomes particularly complex in *Electra,* where various characters often have contradictory, even mutually exclusive responsibilities. For example, as a father, Agamemnon must protect his daughter, Iphigeneia, but as a king, his duty is to sacrifice her for the good of his kingdom. As a son, Orestes must love his mother, but also as a son, he must avenge his father's murder

Style

Stichomythia

A series of short—usually one line—dialogue exchanges between or among characters. The words are often confrontational and language seems to act as a substitutes for physical violence. Originating in Greek tragedy, stichomythia occurs in Roman (i.e. Senacan) tragedies and also in the Elizabethan plays influenced by classical predecessors such as in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Richard III.* In *Electra,* stichomythic dialogue takes place between Electra and Chrysothemis early in the play and between Electra and Orestes during the revelation scene.

Tragic Irony

Irony is a sophisticated rhetorical strategy whereby a character is led to believe one thing, when m fact, the opposite is true. While it serves a dramatic function, it also serves a thematic one, reminding the characters and audience of the limitations of human knowledge: what we know to be certain may not be; and the uncertainty of human circumstances—what we know to be good may turn out badly, while assumed evils may result in good.

In *Electra,* there are several examples of tragic irony. One occurs when Electra thinks that Orestes is dead (while Chrysothemis thinks him alive) when he is alive all along. It recurs later, when Orestes, in disguise, tells Electra of his own death, until her grieving makes him confess the truth.

Tragedy

In his *Poetics,* Aristotle defines a tragedy as a play which recounts the fall or destruction of a person of elevated position. In Classical and Renaissance tragedy, the person is usually a king, though tragedy can befall anyone elevated in politic, ethical, or spiritual terms. For example, Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* is tragic, for, though Faustus is not a noble, he is socially elevated as a great scholar and falls by his own hand in the service of his intellectual pride.

Tragic heroes fall in part because of fate, but their fall is usually not due to destiny alone but rather is complicated by some character flaw, "hubris" or pride usually precipitates such a fall In the case of King Oedipus in Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex,* it is his desire to know the cause of the plague that afflicts his kingdom; the plague was brought on when he killed his father and married his mother. In the case of Hamlet, it is his inaction and hesitation. Because of the offenses of her ancestors, Electra's family is cursed to suffer. This fate or destiny generally dictates her tragedy, but the specific cause is her failure to balance passion (grief at her father's murder) with reason (her mother's guilt is partially mitigated by the role Agamemnon played in their daughter Iphigeneia's death).

Historical Context

Athens and the City-states

Although the exact date of Sophocles' s *Electra* is not known, it was probably written and first performed around 409 B.C. (at that year's Dionysia), when the playwright was in his eighties. At this time, the Greek states were battling one another in the Peloponnesian War. The city-state of Athens had established itself as the dominant region m Greece, following its decisive role in the defeat of die Persians in the battle of Salamis in 480 B.C.

After the Persians were expelled from Greece, the city-states banded together to form the Delian League. This alliance ensured the mutual protection of each state and was ostensibly a confederacy of equals. Each city paid an annual tribute to maintain the strength of the alliance. However, Athens gradually became the leader of the Delian League, and Pericles, head of the Athenians, used the surplus tribute to rebuild the Athenian Acropolis rather than for the common good of all the states.

Under Pericles, the Parthenon and other architectural masterpieces were constructed on the Acropolis at this time (approximately 450 to 405 B.C.). Predictably, members of the other Greek states were angered at Pericles for using their tribute money to beautify his own city. Because of this and other affronts, they waged war against Athens in the Peloponnesian War of 431-404 B.C. Athens ultimately fell to the military strength of Sparta.

Greek Drama

Tragedies such as *Electro,* were presented in the annual Dionysia festivals in Athens, where playwrights competed with each other for a prize. At the Dionysia, each writer presented a group of four plays: three tragedies, which often formed a trilogy on a given subject—such as Sophocles's Oedipal trilogy *{Antigone, Oedipus at Colonus,* and *Oedipus Rex)*—and a satyr-play, which was a form of comic relief. The tragedies concerned mortals who were at the mercy of their fate and who evoked pity from the audience. Greek audiences expected to be moved by the drama unfolding before them, experiencing a catharsis, or a purging (purification) of the emotions of pity and fear. These emotions were associated with the fall of a great person, the tragic hero.

In contrast to the cathartic effect of the tragedies, the satyr-plays provided a lighthearted antidote. In these plays, the chorus dressed as satyrs, figures who were half-man and half-beast, and performed rough but witty routines which can be likened to later forms of light entertainment such as slapstick or vaudevillian comedy. The third genre of Greek drama, comedy, was not performed at the Dionysia. However, there are many surviving comedies from the fifth century B.C., and these seem to have served the function of providing an emotional release also. In addition, comedies were directly political and

provided a vehicle for authors to offer thinly-veiled commentary on the happenings of the day.

The Legend of the House of Atreus

Electra concerns one part of the story of the House of Atreus, a doomed family which was cursed from its inception. According to legend, the patriarch Atreus was the grandson of Tantalus, who killed his own son and served the pieces of his body to the gods at a feast. Because this was an atrocious crime, the gods sentenced Tantalus to eternal punishment in the underworld. They also restored his son, Pelops, to life. Pelops, a favorite of the god Poseidon, won a chariot race which enabled him to claim the beautiful Hippodamia as his wife. However, he was only able to win the race because Hippodamia bribed the other charioteer to lose on purpose. When the charioteer came to claim his bribe, Pelops killed him and the charioteer uttered a curse on Pelops and his descendants as he died.

Atreus, who became the king of Mycenae, was one of the sons of Pelops and Hippodamia. He was cuckolded by his brother, Thyestes, and, in a fit of anger, killed Thyestes's sons and served them to his brother at a banquet* in a crime similar to that of Ms forbearer, Tantalus. Thyestes, upon finding out what Atreus had done, cursed him and his house as well. In order to avenge his sons' deaths, Thyestes learned from the Delphic Oracle that he had to father a child by his own daughter Pelopia; the product of this union was Aegisthus

Atreus, however, believed the boy to be his own son, and raised him as such, since he had in the meantime married Pelopia. But when Aegisthus learned that Thyestes was his true father, he killed Atreus. Thus, Atreus's real sons Agamemnon and Menelaus were forced mto exile as Thyestes took over the throne of Mycenae. The rivalry between Agamemnon and Aegisthus, central to the story of *Electra,* had begun.

Agamemnon married Clytemnestra, producing their daughters Iphigeneia and Electra and their son Orestes. When Agamemnon departed for the Trojan War, Clytemnestra took his rival Aegisthus as, her lover and plotted to kill her husband when he returned. Clytemnestra and Aegisthus succeeded in murdering Agamemnon, and the plot of *Electra* centers around Electra and Orestes's plans to avenge their father's death by killing their mother and Aegisthus.

Sophocles's audience would have been familiar with the legend of the House of Atreus and would have recognized the disparities between his version of the legend and other plays which dealt with the same cursed family. It was not necessary for the classical audience to be presented with the entire legend in any given play; rather, each play concentrated on one major aspect of the larger story, assuming the audience was already familiar with the general legend.

Critical Overview

Since the time of their first production in the fifth century B.C., scholars and critics have contended that the tragedies of Sophocles represent Greek drama in its purest and most highly-attained form. Aristotle used elements of Sophoclean tragedy as the main concepts of his general theory of drama in the *Poetics* According to Aristotle, a tragedy is most successful when the moments of recognition (what he termed anagnorisis) and reversal (peripeteia) occur at the same time. Aristotle claims that a tragedy is not merely the imitation of an individual but of a life. By this he means that an individual's actions are more important to the development of the play than the particulars of his or her character.

Aristotle criticizes plays which include lengthy speeches solely for the purpose of expressing character and praises those works which sacrifice such elements in favor of a meaningful and well-structured plot. Sophocles is considered a master at characterization, particularly in *Electra,* providing just enough necessary information about each character through succinct and direct lines.

The twentieth century writer Edith Hamilton praised Sophocles's characterization, particularly in comparison to his contemporary (and teacher) Aeschylus. In her widely-read book *The Greek Way,* Hamilton claimed that Sophocles surpasses Aeschylus in technical ability, though he falls short in sheer dramatic power. According to Hamilton, when Sophocles wrote a play, it would be done as well as it possibly could be in terms of craftsmanship. In *Electra,* there are no words wasted, no time spent on details which detract from the main thrust of the plot.

Hamilton noted that in this play, Electra's character is conveyed in the terse, compact dialogue exchanged between she and Chrysothemis. The depth of Electra's suffering, expressed in the lament sung between Electra and the chorus, is brought into relief when contrasted with Chrysothemis's compliance and acceptance of her miserable situation. Electra is clearly the stronger and more noble character, striving to avenge their father's murder and not accepting the tyranny of their mother silently. As Hamilton claimed, Sophocles is able to convey the essential elements of his characters and draw the audience into their stories through intense, compressed dialogue which is charged with meaning.

In terms of dramatic power, Hamilton believed that Sophocles does not achieve the emotional heights of which Aeschylus was capable. For example, she wrote that Sophocles passed over the murder of Clytemnestra by her son Orestes, hi order to get to the real climax of the play, the killing of Aegisthos. In her opinion, Sophocles missed a moment of great dramatic opportunity. After Orestes kills Clytemnestra, Electra and her brother discuss the deed only briefly before Aegisthos enters and they prepare to kill him as well.

Hamilton concluded that Sophocles made the matricide into punishment for Clytemnestra's own crime, which would have been accepted by the audience and would

not have moved them into the higher feelings of pity and awe. She argued that the high passion which could have been invoked by the matricide was beyond the reach of Sophocles's talents and that he knew he could not adequately convey such passion. Therefore, she concluded, he did not attempt to write what he could not do perfectly.

Virginia Woolf wrote a brief essay entitled "On Sophocles' Electra" in 1925 (published in *Sophocles: A Collection of Critical Essays),* in which she commented on the way Electra is presented as a tightly bound character, unable to move or act on her own. Woolf claimed that Electra's cries, even in moments of crisis, are bare and consist of mere expressions of emotion. However, these cries are crucial and shape the movement of the play.

Woolf even compared Sophocles's use of dialogue to that of the British novelist Jane Austen *{Pride and Prejudice),* claiming that Austen's female characters, like Electra, are bound and constrained by their social roles yet are able to express much through simple phrases. Though their words may be direct and simple, these women are able to shape the outcome of the drama at hand, even when they themselves are not the most active characters in the story.

Another twentieth century critic writing in the same critical collection on Sophocles (*Sophocles: A Collection of Critical Essays),* Thomas Woodward, also discussed how Sophocles's *Electra* progresses while seemingly bypassing the heroine altogether. Like Woolf, Woodward noted that Electra stands in the midst of a drama which involves the men m the story; she lives in a world of suffering while the men are able to act in a more noble realm. Yet, Electra finds her place in the larger sphere outside of her own feelings, and, according to Woodward, her strength and passion overpower the men's plot; she fully deserves to have the play centered around her.

Though she does not perform the climactic murders herself, Electra is a truly heroic character by virtue of her depths of emotion and her righteous motivation for revenge. Indeed, Sophocles emphasizes her importance by giving her one of the longest speaking parts in Greek tragedy and by having her remain on the stage for nine-tenths of the play. Through all of this, however, the audience is made aware of Electra's isolation as a woman confined to a life inside the palace walls. While Orestes and the other men are able to act on their plans, Electra can only lament. Yet it is perhaps her lamentations which cause the gods to send Orestes back—and so she is able to provoke action, even if she is restricted from acting herself.

Woodward and other modern critics have also asserted the importance of props as dramatic devices in Sophocles's work. In Electra, the urn which Orestes carries when he enters the "recognition" scene dominates the stage. It is the focus of the scene: Electra addresses it in a lament while holding it in her arms, almost as if it were a living actor. It is, in fact, a surrogate for Orestes, until he reveals himself to her. Because of how Electra acts towards the urn, Orestes ceases to conceal his true identity from her. The urn therefore is critical to the tragedy—once Orestes reveals himself to Electra, she is released from her sorrows and the play quickly draws to its bloody conclusion.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Schmidt received his Ph.D. from Vanderbill University, where he specialized in literature and drama. Exploring the cycles of violence in Electra leads him to consider the play as an allegory of the law.

Ordinarily, a hero is a righteous person who stands on the side of justice, fighting oppression. In many ways, Electra's personality, strong and determined, is admirable and heroic. Her desire to avenge the murder of Agamemnon, her father, regardless of the consequences, is commendable, but her situation is more complicated that of an ordinary hero. In the world of *Electra,* heroism depends on one's point of view. From Agamemnon's perspective, Electra would be heroic, but from Clytemnestra's point of view, her daughter may seem admirable but misguided. The fact that right and wrong change places depending on how the circumstances are considered is significant. It raises the possibility that an absolute standard of justice may elude us. Further, since this is a blood feud with a long history, the rights and wrongs almost fade into the fog of time.

The play's moral high-ground shifts back and forth, as victims of crimes become criminals themselves—and visa versa. The play attempts to distinguish between what was done—the crime—and who was to blame—the criminal—and why they acted as they did. It explores differences between the fact of the crime and the personal guilt or innocence based on premeditation, intention, and free will, for which an individual can be liable. It raises questions not of Justice (is this a crime against the law?), but of Equity (yes, it's against the law but are there extenuating circumstances).

For example, two people steal money. One is a poor man who has never stolen anything before in his life; out of work, he needs money to buy medicine to save his dying daughter's life. The other man is a multi-millionaire who has been convicted of stealing half a dozen times now, who wanted the money because he wanted the money. Yes, they both stole. They're both guilty of breaking the law, but are their crimes the same—in other words, should they be punished identically? They are identical in regard to the letter of the law but in terms of equity—fairness, they differ. The poor man's crime seems understandable and justified— to some extent, at least—while the rich man's criminal act appears motivated solely by greed.

Part of the problem—in the previous example as in *Electra*—stems from a conflict between and among different types of law: divine law or the will of the gods; natural law, based on blood relationships; and human law, ordained by the state. In the world of the play, human law is the weakest of the three. Solutions to grievances depend more on an ethic of revenge rather than on justice. How else can a victim seek remedy for injustice? The answer lies in a society's stages of development.

In primitive society, loyalty to the family surpasses loyalty to the state and without a powerful state government to make and enforce law, vengeance remains necessary. Crime demands retribution and since the intermediary third party, the state, is weak and

unable to impose a just settlement, the family seeks revenge. One of the things embedded in Electra's story, though, is an end to this cycle of revenge and the initiation of a modern, rational system of justice.

From Agamemnon's perspective, killing Iphi-geneia was just. After all, the king of all gods, Zeus, ordered him to undertake the Trojan War and Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter in the service of that cause, obeying what he believes to be the will of the gods. Agamemnon's actions may violate natural law, a father killing his child, and human law but they seem in accordance with divine law as the Greeks understood it; this is the highest law and Agamemnon obeys.

Clytemnestra privileges natural law, the love of a mother for her child, over divine law, the need to sacrifice Iphigeneia to prosecute the war. Clytemnestra admits to violating human law in killing Agamemnon, but is pleased that Iphigeneia's sacrifice (what she sees as Agamemnon's greater crime) mitigates her guilt. As she tells Electra: "I killed him Because that man who you still cry for Was the one Greek who could bear to sacrifice / Your sister," Iphigeneia.

Electra strikes an uneasy balance between natural and divine law. She appeals to natural law in condemning her mother, saying, "You issue yourself remorse and punishment. / For if a killer merits death / You must die next, to satisfy that justice." Electra's position is not pure, however, for she ignores the claims of natural law that called for Iphigeneia's revenge, which Clytemnestra has satisfied in killing her husband. On this point, Electra appeals to divine law, asking what else Agamemnon could do, under orders from the gods to fight the war and believing his daughter's sacrifice was the only way to free his fleet.

Complicating the debate between them is Clytemnestra's marriage with Agamemnon's murderer, Aegisthos. Electra calls her mother's appeal to natural law an "ugly pretext.... To join with a mortal enemy in marriage."

Orestes's position is unique, as he finds himself punished by one divine entity, the Furies, for obeying another divine entity, Apollo. By revenging his father and killing his mother at the insistence of the gods, he obeys divine law and violates natural law. After all, Orestes should by nature have been the avenger of his mother's death, except for the fact that he is her murderer. Finding himself persecuted by the Furies, Orestes too feels it is wrong for him to be punished for doing what the gods ordered.

Chrysothemis is a militant centrist, trying to hold a middle ground. She recognizes that Clytemnestra's actions are evil and that Agamemnon should be revenged. She also realizes that she has no real power and is ready to accept necessity. She echoes the position recommended by the Chorus, who see and proclaim against evil but advocate stoic acceptance of life's tribulations As Chrysothemis says, "be reasonable.... Helpless as you are, yield to the strong."

In *Electra,* there are a series of wrongs present: Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter Iphigeneia; Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon; Orestes (aided/ supported by Electra) kills

Clytemnestra. All are wrong yet all have reasons which justify their actions—and in that sense, all are justly motivated. We might ask: is Orestes his mother's murderer or executioner? Is he murdering her or serving justice to her for killing Agamemnon. She might reply that she did not kill Agamemnon but "executed" him for his role in the sacrifice of their daughter, Iphigeneia. To which Agamemnon might reply, it was the gods who prevented the fleet from moving unless Iphigeneia was sacrificed—is not her death the fault of the gods?

Remaining within the narrative history of a single play in this family drama, it is impossible to escape this cycle of accusation and recrimination. The myth—and the drama—continues in Aeschylus's *Eumenides,* where it can be seen to tell the origin of Attic democracy. After killing Clytemnestra, Orestes flees, pursued by the avenging Furies. He finds solace only in the temple of Athena, who appreciates his predicament. She decides his case cannot be adjudicated by the gods alone and so sets it before a human jury in the Court of Areopagus.

Critics see this symbolizing the birth of the Greek rule of law, a movement from an ethic of revenge to a system of justice and equity (a system that supports and informs modern justice). Based on reason, the decision of human jurors ends this cycle of blood feuding. The story of Electra's family concludes with the classical endorsement of reason's role in moderating passion.

Source: Arnold Schmidt, for *Drama for Students,* Gale, 1998

Critical Essay #2

Walton provides an overview of Sophocles's Electra in this essay. He differentiates Sophocles's version of the story from similar works by his Greek contemporaries Euripides (a play also titled Electra) and Aeschylus (who chronicles the legend in his trilogy the Oresteia).

Orestes, son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, arrives back in Argos from exile to avenge the murder of his father by his mother. A plot is hatched which leads to the death of Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus, but the play centres on the character of Electra, Orestes's sister, and her sufferings at the hands of Clytemnestra.

The Electra plays of Sophocles and Euripides share plot and main characters, if not title, with *Libation-Bearers,* the middle play of Aeschylus's *Oresteia.* The relationship between the two *Electra* plays is a subject of constant debate, as no firm date can be assigned to either. The approach is so different that a case can be made for either *Electra* having been written as a riposte to the other. What is not in doubt is that at the time of writing his *Electra* Sophocles and Euripides each knew Aeschylus's *Libation-Bearers* and could be confident that their audience did too.

Sophocles declares his independence from any previous version in the opening scene with the arrival back in Argos of Orestes and Pylades with Orestes's Servant or Tutor, a new character in the story, who is to play a major role in carrying out Orestes's revenge on Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. When Orestes has announced his intentions, the Tutor persuades him to leave before the entrance of Electra. The rest of the play is effectively Electra's; she remains on stage, a picture of mounting desperation, as she continues to mourn her father despite her mother's plans to have her put away. She loses her last hope with the news that Orestes has been killed in a chariot-race. She resolves to take action herself, with or without the help of her sister Chrysothemis. With no more than a quarter of the play to run, she finds herself confronting the urn containing her brother's ashes.

But his death is, in fact, only supposition. The audience know that her brother is alive and holding the urn himself. It was the Tutor who told the story of the fatal race. It is all part of the plot, and only Electra's passionate grief weakens Orestes's resolve to keep her in the dark until he has succeeded m his revenge. Electra's plight runs parallel to Orestes's return, but until late in the play has no effect upon it. Indeed, when brother and sister are reunited their extravagant behaviour almost sabotages the plot

The recognition scene, which Aeschylus placed early in his *Libation-Bearers,* is delayed by Sophocles so as to provide an emotional climax that the violent end of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus barely matches. The use of a stage-property, in this case the urn, is a device used elsewhere by Sophocles to concentrate and externalise an issue; Ajax's sword in *Ajax,* and the bow of Heracles in *Philoctetes* offer similar examples of the stage power residing in an object. The urn has the extra dimension of being both a mechanism in the plot and a trigger to the release of Electra from her captivity.

The powerful emphasis on Electra's character is at the expense of the moral dilemma of Orestes. Aeschylus based the *Oresteia* on the paradox inherent in the demand of a God that a son avenge his father, when to do so involves the killing of his mother. Euripides in his *Electra* stresses the horror of the act of matricide with an Orestes driven reluctantly to commit an unnatural act. For both of these playwrights the climax was the murder of Clytemnestra—with Aegisthus killed first in order not to distract from the mother and son confrontation.

Sophocles reverses the order of the murders. Aegisthus is away from the palace when the Tutor tells of the chariot-race and when Orestes introduces the urn to confirm the story. Clytemnestra's death is simply an appropriate act accompanied by neither the threat of the Furies which hounded Aeschylus's Orestes, nor the conscience and revulsion which torment him in Euripides's version. For Sophocles, Apollo has authorised Clytemnestra's death and that is enough. When Aegisthus does appear, Clytemnestra is already dead, a sheeted figure he takes for the body of Orestes. The revelation that it is Clytemnestra offers as macabre a moment as any in Sophocles and leads rapidly to the conclusion of the play. Though Orestes and Electra are now united, her oppressors dead, her story continues to run parallel to that of her brother without the two truly overlapping.

By consciously bypassing the issue of matricide Sophocles returns to a Homeric notion of justice. In the *Odyssey* Orestes had been held up as a model of filial behaviour with no questions raised about the rightness of his actions. But in Homer Aegisthus was the principal villain and there was no Electra. Aeschylus had added the moral dimension with the clash between Apollo, demanding that Orestes avenge his father, and the Furies demanding their due for the murder of a mother. Sophocles does not dodge this issue. He deflects it, by introducing new characters and a novel dramatic structure, in order to point to Electra herself. Few Greek plays are as single-minded in their presentation of the individual.

Source: J Michael Walton, *"Electra " in The International Dictionary of Theatre 1: Plays,* edited by Mark Hawkms-Dady, St James Press, 1992, p. 218

Critical Essay #3

In this review, Hawkins encapsulates the plot of Electra and appraises a 1987production of the play.

High on the wall of the *scenae frons* for this production of Sophocles' *Electra* is hung a gigantic reproduction of Schliemann's so-called "mask of Agamemnon." This giant face, its mouth rendered much more severe than in the original—so severe that under many of the lighting conditions of the performance, it seems to harden into a scowl— stands as mute witness to this play, with its bizarre remnants of his great Mycenean kingdom. Hanging profusely, even haphazardly, below the face are black curtains which catch the light at certain times in the play, looking at these moments like a blood-streaked shroud, littered with slashes. More significant use might have been made of the face: although it possesses an attitude, we do not sense that the characters do what they do because the face impels them.

At the start of the performance, the center door opens-slowly, lit from behind like a great red furnace. It comes up like an automatic garage door, and the slowness and ominousness with which it rises sets the rhythm for the first section of the performance. Then the actors file in through the door in a dumb-show that at first seems too long, too tedious: they seem to be entering merely in order to introduce the characters. They walk in a kind of death march, and their gradual massing on the stage, m the half-light, gives a mounting sense of both grief and fore-boding. The dumb-show ends with a re-enactment, in silence and slow-motion, of the murder of Agamemnon-—but done in such a spare manner that we are sure only of the death blow, and the plucking of the crown from the head of the falling figure by the female murderer, as all actors exit. Then the center door slowly closes, and Sophocles' play begins.

After the brief *prologos,* in which Orestes seems almost bewildered, as if he had wandered in from another play *(Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead,* perhaps), we have the most striking clue that we are about to witness a remarkable performance: the entrance of Electra This production, from first to last, is rooted firmly in Marietta Rialdi's startling portrayal of Electra. To begin with, at her entrance, she really does not enter at all. The center door opens, and we see (or think we see, with the light in our eyes) an ambulatory bed, a kind of hospital gurney, at the head of which is a ghostly figure in dark glasses—the attendant, apparently. On the bed is a strange, stunted figure, whose voice we can locate only because of the fluttering of its arms. The figure on the bed is Electra, crying in a kind of hysterical lost-child's voice—exhausted, it seems, from having done this for days, months, years. Has she been confined to this bed because of mental illness, strapped in out of fear that the madwoman will harm herself? She has the shrill demented sound of the profoundly insane.

The remarkable achievement of Rialdi is that she portrays a constant emotional state of being *in extremis*—on one shrill note that seems never to waver, conveying Electra's total commitment to the cause of keeping alive the memory of her slain father—yet *never* tires us. Her cries become a kind of accompaniment that has a stylistic tightness

to the events which have given it impulse. She *cannot* relent, and we begin to enter *her* vortex of grief and despair. She moves us easily from vicarious experience—the second-hand experience of the audience^—toward an experience that seems direct, that feels like our own. Rialdi keeps us engaged by modulating, phrasing, slightly varying her pace and her pitches, a striking vocal achievement. She seems to draw no breath, and we discover ourselves gasping, taking them for her. She goes from grief to grief without flagging: her speech of despair later on in the play, to the urn supposedly containing the ashes of the dead Orestes, which she embraces fiercely, like a lover, is the most spectacular reminder to us that any true grief is bottomless, wretched, unremitting.

Her entrance sets the tone for all of this. Lying on the gurney, she is only partially visible to us— she remains inside the inner below for a long portion of her speech. We see her forearms flapping, as if to punctuate her speech, but they seem ineffectual, like vestigial wings. Then the gurney is wheeled in to Left Center, and parked there, abandoned. Electra's vocalizations and her emotional extension do not waver through any of this. Continuing her strange aria, she gradually struggles to a sitting position, then throws her legs over the edge of the gurney, then stands on the floor, then waddles away on her own. Rialdi, who is tiny in physical stature, is brilliant throughout this section. Her struggle to walk is inept, uncoordinated. Her body seems to have atrophied from her time in bed, and her limbs seem incapable of response. Her physical appearance is dwarfish, warped.

One is grateful to Rialdi for daring to exhibit herself so unattractively in order to convey with such realism and poignancy the *dementia* of Electra. She gives us much of Hugo von Hofmannstahl's insight into this character, and serves Sophocles with it brilliantly. Her dementia has a further extension: at the moment of Orestes' revelation of his identity to Electra, the audience responds with greater relief and enthusiasm than she does. We are momentarily baffled by Electra's seeming not to notice. She takes in this information only insofar as it means that the revenge can now be resumed. She is so steeped in her own habits of grief and self-pity that she cannot alter her pattern of behavior, even as she is delivered from them. Rialdi's is a thoroughly original performance.

In the important scene between Electra and Clytemnestra, much is revealed to the audience of the similarities between the two women. Electra has waited years for her revenge, as did Clytemnestra, but the latter's hatred has since metamorphosed into fear. As with Electra, the central emotion goes deep, to the core of her self. Rialdi's Electra—the demented soprano—and Thalia Calliga's aging Clytemnestra—all *contralto profundissimo*—argue in a duet skillfully handled in its sustained, slow movements, and deliberate, forceful vocalization. Their passages of stichomythia make sharp contact between the adversaries, as Clytemnestra, edgy and defensive, refuses to face Electra, and stands looking at us—the ambiguity in her face impossible to decipher.

Minor objections aside, the production stands on the achievements of Marietta Rialdi, who has given a startling and bold interpretation of Sophocles' play and of his central character. Her success is in no small measure due to her acting, based as it is upon her

willingness to expose the last indignity of Electra. But Rialdi refuses to allow us the comfort of sympathy for her; instead, she makes us face the ugly reality. Electra's hatred has consumed her utterly.

Source: John A. Hawkins, review of *Electra in Theatre Journal,* Volume 39, no. 3, October, 1987, pp 387-89.

Topics for Further Study

The question of how much of human action is directed by free will and how much is determined by fate has fascinated people from the Greeks to the present. Think about this issue in historical terms, considenng the impact of the natural sciences on this debate or in philosophical terms, researching the ideas of Existentialist writers like Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus.

In many ways, Electra is a powerful woman and can be seen as someone driven toward a higher purpose by her profound inner strength. How do her actions fit into the Greek definition of hero? Is that definition different for a woman that it would be for a man? You might research classical mythology generally (reading Ovid's *Metamorphosis,* for example) or Homer's *Odyssey.* Or you could compare Electra with another of Sophocles's titular heroines, Antigone

The cycle of plays of which *Electra* can be seen as a part raise important issues about the relationship between divine law to human law. Try to develop an independent standard of criteria by which people might act ethically. You might look at classical waters like Aristotle (the *Ethics* or *Politics)* or you might research into the relationship between law and literature.

Critics have argued that while Sophocles's play is entitled *Electra,* Electra herself is not really central to the play's action. They contend that she stands around speaking while those around her act. Do you agree?

Compare and Contrast

The Athenian Age: Greece has a legal system based largely on revenge. Later, during the high point of Athenic culture in (he fifth century B.C., a more complicated system of law develops, one on which many modern legal concepts are based.

Today: Legal systems prevent people from seeking revenge individually (acting as vigilantes). Rather, injuries are remedied by way of the courts

The Athenian Age: It is a sign of respect to cremate the dead and keep their ashes in urns. These are large vessels decorated with graphics that identify the deceased, relating key events from their lives. For warriors, the urns might recount their most celebrated battles.

Today: While some people are cremated, many are buried in caskets below the ground.

The Athenian Age: Greeks' lives are largely dictated by what they believe the gods intend. Worship of multiple gods, who represent such aspects of life as war, music, love, and agriculture, is commonplace.

Today: Monotheistic religion (the worship of one god) dominates world religion. While some still believe their destinies are controlled by a higher power, many more believe that humankind shapes and directs its own fate.

What Do I Read Next?

Another of Sophocles's tragedies, *Antigone* tells of a woman's straggle to bury her brother's body against the orders of the king. Like *Electro,* it features a strong female character and involves the conflict between family and politics. *Antigone* is the last play in the Oedipal trilogy.

In three plays, *Mourning Becomes Electra, Ah! Wilderness,* and *Days without End,,* the Nobel Prize-winning American playwright Eugene O'Neill retells the story of Electra and her family's tragedy.

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* bears many similarities with *Electra,* including the murdered father, the widow's marriage to the murderer, and ineffective efforts at revenge.

For a very different kind of tragedy, consider Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman,* which relates the tribulations of an average man whose flaw is a naive obsession with the American Dream.

Further Study

Blundell, Sue *Women in Ancient Greece,* Harvard University Press, 1995.

This book illuminates the world of women in Sophocles's time, revealing that although their roles were limited, they contributed to the cultural and artistic life of Ancient Greece.

Nardo, Don, Editor *Readings on Sophocles,* Greenhaven Press, 1997.

This is a collection of critical essays on Sophocles, which also includes a useful appendix on Greek theatrical production and a biography of the playwright

Woodward, Thomas, Editor. *Sophocles: A Collection of Critical Essays,* Prentice-Hall, 1966.

Woodward's collection of essays includes his own article, "The *Electro* of Sophocles," and Virginia Woolf s essay, "On Sophocles's *Electra."* The collection also offers an excellent cntical overview of many of Sophocles's dramatic works

Bibliography

Hamilton, Edith *The Greek Way, W.W* Norton (New York), 1930, pp 258-70.

Woodward, Thomas. "The *Electra* of Sophocles" in *Sophocles: A Collection of Critical Essays,* edited by Woodward, Prentice-Hall, 1966, pp. 125-45

Woolf, Virginia. * 'On Sophocles' s *Electra"* in *Sophocles. A Collection of Critical Essays,* edited by Thomas Woodward, Prentice-Hall, 1966, pp. 122-24.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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