# Electra Study Guide

## Electra by Hugo von Hofmannsthal

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# Introduction

Hugo von Hofmannsthal's play *Electra*, which was first performed in Germany in 1903 (German title, *Elektra*) and published in English translation in 1908, is available in the volume, *Hugo von Hofmannsthal: Three Plays*, translated by Alfred Schwartz (Wayne State University Press, 1966). This volume is currently out of print.

*Electra* is a free adaptation of the play of the same name by the ancient Greek dramatist, Sophocles. The story focuses on the consequences of the murder of Agamemnon. Agamemnon was the king of Mycenae who was killed by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus upon his return from the Trojan War. The play takes place ten years after the slaying. Agamemnon's daughter Electra still mourns her beloved father's death and obsessively anticipates the moment when she will avenge him by killing her mother. The revenge comes when Electra's brother Orestes returns from exile and kills both Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.

*Electra* is a study in mental disturbance and obsession. It uses the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, which had been published only a few years before von Hofmannsthal wrote the play. *Electra* also employs powerful, lurid imagery that gives vivid insight into the disturbed minds of Electra and Clytemnestra, and it moves singlemindedly to its violent conclusion. Although rarely performed today, the play has become famous because von Hofmannsthal adapted it as the libretto for German composer Richard Strauss's thrilling opera, *Elektra* (1909).

# Author Biography

Dramatist, poet, novelist, and essayist, Hugo von Hofmannsthal was born on February 1, 1874, in Vienna, Austria. He was the only son of Hugo August (a bank director) and Anna Maria von Hofmannsthal. Von Hofmannsthal attended the Wiener Akademisches Gymnasium, where he wrote his first poetry, drama, and essays. He was considered a precocious talent. After graduating in 1892, he entered law school at the University of Vienna, but dropped out in 1894 to join the military. Returning to the same school a year later, he studied for four years, receiving a Ph.D. in Romance philology in 1899. By that time, he had already established himself as a writer, much admired by prominent men of letters in Austria and Germany. He helped to form the Jung Wien (Young Vienna), a group of writers who rejected naturalism in literature and adopted the principles of the French Symbolist tradition.

Von Hofmannsthal's work is often divided into three periods. The earliest phase lasted from about 1890 to the turn of the century. It consisted mainly of poetry and lyric drama, including such works as *Der Tod des Tizian* (1901; trans. *The Death of Titian*, 1914), and *Der Thor und der Tod* (1900; trans. *Death and the Fool*, 1913). The second period, from about 1900 to the beginning of World War I, was a transitional one. Von Hofmannsthal placed less emphasis on the precept of "art for art's sake" that had characterized his earlier works and developed a deeper regard for human issues and concerns. It was during this period that he wrote *Elektra* (1904; trans. *Electra*, 1908), a free adaptation of the play by Sophocles. Shortly after this, von Hofmannsthal's twenty-three year working relationship with German composer Richard Strauss began. With von Hofmannsthal as his librettist, Strauss composed six operas: *Elektra* (1909), *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911), *Ariadne auf Naxos* (1912), *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (1919), *Die agyptische Helena* (1928), and *Arabella* (1933). To this period of von Hofmannsthal's work also belongs his play *Jedermann* (1911; trans. *Everyman*, 1917).

From 1914 to 1917, von Hofmannsthal served in the military, as a translator and courier.

Von Hofmannsthal's final creative period produced several comedies and the morality plays written for the Salzburg Festival, which he helped to found. The most notable works from this period are the comedy *Der Schwierige* (1921; trans. *The Difficult Man*, 1963), and the two versions of *Der Turm* (first version 1925; second version, 1927, both of which premiered in 1928; trans. *The Tower*, 1963).

Hofmannsthal married Gertrud Schlesinger in 1901. They had three children, Christiane, Raimund, and Franz. On July 15, 1929, Hofmannsthal died of a heart attack at his home in Rodaun, near Vienna, Austria.

# Plot Summary

*Electra* begins in the inner courtyard of Clytemnestra's palace. A group of women servants, with their matron overseers, are gathered around a well. As the servants draw water, they discuss what has become of Electra, and one says that it is the time of day when she howls loudly for her dead father.

Electra appears. As all the servants turn to look at her, she goes back into hiding, holding one arm in front of her face. The servants discuss how Electra has been abusive towards them and one servant describes how she answered Electra back with insults of her own. It also transpires from the servants' talk that Electra is ill-treated in the house. She is beaten and made to eat with the dogs. No one in the house can endure the terrible look on her face. But the fifth servant, a young girl, speaks up in support of Electra as a royal princess.

As the servants and matrons go inside, Electra reappears. She is still grieving for her father, Agamemnon. She describes how Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus killed him while he was in the bath. Crying out that she wants to see him, she appeals to him not to leave her alone. She tells him that his day of vengeance will come. His murderers and all their servants, even their horses and dogs, will be slaughtered. When this is done, she, Orestes, and Chrysothemis will dance around their father's grave.

Chrysothemis enters. She tells Electra that Clytemnestra and Aegisthus are planning to throw her, Electra, into a dark dungeon. Electra responds by telling her sister not to listen in on Clytemnestra's conversations. She should just sit and wait for judgment to come upon the murderers. Chrysothemis responds that she is frightened and cannot sit still. She wants to get out of the house, live a normal life and bear children. She says that no one profits from their continuing anguish and Orestes will not return. She just wants to forget the past and feels that she could do so if only she could escape from the palace. But Electra says she cannot forget and is scornful of her sister's words. Chrysothemis bursts into tears. Then she tells Electra that she should hide because Clytemnestra is coming and she has been complaining of bad dreams. Electra boasts that it is she who has sent the nightmare, which is of her mother's own death at the hands of Orestes.

Chrysothemis rushes out and Clytemnestra enters. She is pale and trembles with anger, and her clothing is covered with jewels and charms. Electra gives her mother the impression that she is in a pleasant mood, so Clytemnestra says she wishes to speak to her. Electra reproaches her angrily and says it grieves her to see Aegisthus wearing the robes of her dead father. Clytemnestra retorts that she will not listen, but then she seems to have a change of heart and tells her confidante and trainbearer to leave. Clytemnestra then asks her daughter if she knows how she could be relieved of her bad dreams—by performance of a ritual sacrifice, for example. Clytemnestra declares that she is rotting inside. Her torment is so great that she no longer knows who she is. Electra gives broad hints about who the victim of the sacrifice should be, but Clytemnestra does not understand what she is saying. She insists on knowing the name

of the victim and the rite she would need to perform. Electra gives only cryptic answers and keeps bringing the subject back to Agamemnon's murder. Eventually, Clytemnestra tells her to be silent about it. When Electra mentions Orestes, her brother who was sent away, Clytemnestra trembles. Electra believes her mother is afraid because she knows that Orestes is alive and will return to carry out vengeance. Clytemnestra continues to insist that Electra tell her the name of the victim and the rites that are to be performed. She threatens to imprison Electra in chains and starve her if she refuses. Electra responds with more wild and fiery words about the coming vengeance. She describes her mother's terror as the avenger is about to strike.

At this point, when Clytemnestra is full of fear, her confidante enters and whispers something in her ear. Clytemnestra's expression changes from fear to evil triumph, and as she runs back into the house, the reason for her sudden joy becomes clear. Chrysothemis enters, crying out that Orestes is dead. Electra refuses to believe the news. Chrysothemis wants to question the messengers to find out the details of Orestes' death, but Electra simply insists that now, she and her sister must carry out the vengeance and do so that very night. Chrysothemis does not understand at first, and then is speechless when Electra explains what her plans are. Chrysothemis protests that Electra is mad, but Electra grabs her and tells her she must help in the killing because she is physically strong. Horrified, Chrysothemis just wants to get away from the house. But, Electra, assuming that her sister will do what she is told, says that from now on she will be her devoted servant, even slave. She insists that Chrysothemis must do the deed and that there is no way out for her. Then, she will be free and able to marry and bear the children that she desires. Chrysothemis frees herself from Electra's grasp and runs off, saying that she cannot do the killing. Electra resolves to do it herself, alone.

Orestes enters, but neither he nor Electra recognize each other. Orestes questions her about who she is and says he has come to convey to the mistress of the house the details of Orestes's death, which he witnessed. Electra tells him to get out of her sight and she falls once more to expressing the misery of her life. Then after Orestes again asks who she is, Electra speaks her name. At first, Orestes does not believe it is her because she looks so different from the gracious sister he remembers. Orestes then declares that Orestes is still alive, and Electra demands to know where he is. She assumes he must be in danger. When a servant rushes in and kneels before Orestes and kisses his feet, Electra finally realizes who the visitor is. Orestes says that he has come to avenge their father's death; the gods have imposed the deed on him and he has no choice. He will do it quickly. Orestes' tutor enters and after a moment of confusion, Electra recognizes him. She says that now she can believe that Orestes really has returned.

Orestes and the tutor go inside where they know Clytemnestra is. Electra remains alone in suspense. A piercing cry comes from Clytemnestra and is quickly followed by a second cry. The servants realize that something is going on although they do not know what.

Aegisthus arrives and Electra bows down before him. He says he wants to see the messengers who brought news of Orestes's death. Electra assures him that Orestes is indeed dead. As they move to the house, she dances around him. Aegisthus enters the house and shortly afterwards begins to shout for help, saying that he is being murdered. Pandemonium breaks out. Chrysothemis reports that all the members of the household who hated Aegisthus are kissing Orestes's feet. She says that fights broke out between those who loathed their master and those who supported him. Many dead bodies are lying in the courtyards. Electra is overwhelmed and at first cannot rise to her feet. Then she manages to rise and dances a wild dance. After ordering everyone else to dance too, she falls insensible to the floor and lies there rigid. Chrysothemis pounds on the door of the house calling for Orestes.

# Detailed Summary & Analysis

## Summary

This play opens at dusk in an inner courtyard formed by the low buildings of servants' houses and the rear wall of the palace of Clytemnestra and her husband Aegisthus. Gathered around a well are female servants of the palace, with a Matron who oversees them at their tasks. As they fill their pitchers with water, several of the women remark on the absence of Clytemnestra's daughter, Electra, noting that it is the time of day when she generally appears there, howling in mourning for her dead father, Agamemnon.

As if on cue, Electra appears, running into the courtyard from a darkening hallway. When the women turn to stare at her she reacts as if under attack, backing away and throwing one arm up in a defensive pose across her face. The servants liken her to a wild, unfriendly animal, one who abuses them verbally and says they like blowflies that settle on her wounds. One of the women admits that when Electra taunted her recently, merely for living life as usual, she answered her back, pointing out that Electra, too, has human needs as she still has to eat. But Electra claims she is not eating but feeding: she is feeding a "vulture" in her body.

Some of the women complain that it is shocking that Electra is even allowed to roam free in the palace, believing that she should be under lock and key. They also reveal, however, that although she is a princess, being the daughter of Queen Clytemnestra, Electra is treated like an animal, beaten and fed from a bowl on the floor with the dogs. The youngest of the servants dares to defend Electra, saying that even though she may be clothed in rags and no one can bear to look at her, there is nothing nobler than Electra. The Matron, angry with the young girl for speaking in support of the princess, has the servant beaten.

After the Matron and the servants are finished at the well and go inside, Electra returns to the courtyard. Light shines from the palace and through the fig tree, coloring her and the nearby wall blood red. Facing the ground, she speaks to her dead father, reminding him that it was at that same hour of the night that his wife and her lover murdered him as he lay in his bath, then dragged his bloody corpse outside. She beseeches him not to abandon her, and imagines him standing there alive once more. She promises to avenge his death by spilling the blood of not only the perpetrators, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, but also of their servants, their horses, and even their dogs. When this has been done, she swears that she and her sister Chrysothemis and her brother Orestes will do a victory dance on his blood-soaked grave.

While Electra cries out to her dead father, her younger sister Chrysothemis watches in fear from a doorway, then calls out quietly. She warns Electra that Clytemnestra and Aegisthus are plotting to throw Electra into the dungeon. Electra calls it a boast, and tells her sister not to listen to them but sit in the dark and wish death and judgment upon them. Chrysothemis admits that she cannot sit still; as her fear is so intense she cannot

bear to stay in one place for long and keeps running from room to room. She says cannot even weep. She speaks of her burning desire to leave the palace, to marry—even a peasant—and bring forth children, and blames Electra's smoldering hatred and mad behavior for their continued imprisonment within the palace. She says it does no one any good to continue in such anguish, as nothing will change: their father will still be dead, and their brother will not return. All around her, she says, are women having children, while the two sisters merely grow older and more lined with each passing day. Chrysothemis says she desires a woman's fate.

Electra scorns her sister's words, reminding her with disdain that it just that sort of emotion—"the beast giving pleasure to the fouler beast"—that led to their father's murder at the hands of his adulterous wife and her lover in the first place. Chrysothemis begs her sister to try to forget, the very idea of which angers Electra, who suggests that forgetting the crime would make her complicit. In tears, Chrysothemis tries again to warn her sister to run and hide, as now that their mother, Clytemnestra, has been having horrible dreams, she is all the more determined to throw Electra in the dungeon since her angry presence is such a reminder. Electra claims that it is she who has sent the dreams to Clytemnestra, the same dream over and over again in which Electra and her father kill the queen with an axe. As she is describing the dream in lurid detail, Clytemnestra's procession approaches. Chrysothemis pleads with her older sister one last time, reminding her that the queen and her entourage drive before them servants with knives and packs of animals to be slaughtered. This serves only to make Electra more determined to face her mother.

The sounds of whips and screams drives Chrysothemis out through the courtyard door in fear, just as her mother's torch-lit figure appears in a window. The queen is accompanied by her purple-robed Confidante and by her Trainbearer, a woman resembling "an upright snake." Clytemnestra is festooned with a great many jewels, charms, armbands and rings. She spies Electra in the courtyard and demands that the gods reveal why she must be persecuted by the animal before her. Slyly, Electra says that Clytemnestra herself must be of the race of the gods, and should be able to answer for herself. The Confidante and the Trainbearer warn the queen that Electra is not to be trusted, yet Clytemnestra finds something healing in Electra's manner and decides to speak to her daughter alone. From the threshold she warns Electra that being spiteful could lead to her ruin, but Electra pleases her by likening her again to a god for her power to give life, and to take it away. Toying with her mother, she then says how it grieves her to see Aegisthus wearing robes that were clearly meant for a much larger man. When the Confidante and the Trainbearer warn the queen that Electra is not being truthful, she dismisses them. She then implores her daughter to give her a remedy for the bad dreams that plague her. She admits that she has covered herself with gems in the hopes that they can ward off the nightmares, the rot she feels inside, and her sense that she is "sinking alive into chaos."

When Clytemnestra asks if there might be some ritual sacrifice that would end the torment, Electra assures her that there is, and that once the right victim has fallen beneath the axe, the dreams will stop. There follows a rapid exchange where Clytemnestra tries to extract the name of the one to be sacrificed, and Electra replies in

short, cryptic answers, always adding subtle reminders of the murder that took place. At last Clytemnestra believes she has enough of an answer: a man of the house will perform the required sacrifice for her, and the dreams will end forever.

Clytemnestra admits that she has no real memory of the murder, only of the events leading up to it and then the sight of her dying husband. She claims that if she saw Agamemnon that day she would probably speak tenderly to him as an old friend. The offhand way her mother speaks of the murder—"like a quarrel before supper"—angers Electra. She asks about her brother Orestes, whom Clytemnestra has sent away. The very mention of his name makes the queen tremble, and Electra suggests that her mother is afraid because she knows that one day Orestes will come back. Clytemnestra denies it, and threatens to place Electra in shackles and starve her until she reveals the name of the one who must bleed. Electra leaps at her from the dark like an animal and reveals that it is the queen herself who must die, and that there is nowhere she can hide when the hunter moves in for the kill. She vividly portrays the violent, gory scene of vengeance she has imagined so many times.

Clytemnestra stands terrified before a fervent Electra. Then the hallway brightens and the Confidante whispers something in the queen's ear that removes all traces of fear and replaces it with a look of smug satisfaction. Without a word, she leaves Electra standing the dark courtyard, utterly confused. Chrysothemis rushes to her sister's side, wailing that Orestes is dead. Electra refuses to believe it. A manservant is dispatched to send word to Aegisthus. While her sister wants details of their brother's death from the messengers, Electra merely determines that if Orestes is dead then it is up to the two of them to carry out the vengeance, and to do so that very night. When Chrysothemis resists the idea, Electra tries to woo her with flattery, extolling her many virtues with all the ardor of a lover: strength that flows like pent-up water from a rock, litheness and agility, beauty and energy. Electra offers herself as a faithful personal attendant, a virtual slave, to Chrysothemis, pledging to fulfill her every desire, and even prepare her sister for the much-awaited union with her presumptive bridegroom—providing Chrysothemis will act with Electra and exact revenge that night. Though Electra promises that no permanent stain of blood will cling to her, Chrysothemis flees.

Resolved to carry out the revenge alone, even though she knows it is dangerous to act alone, Electra begins digging near the wall of the courtyard for the axe—the one used in Agamemnon's murder—she has buried there. Orestes enters the courtyard, but brother and sister do not recognize each other. She says she is nothing and has no one, and he assumes she is a servant, and she does not disagree. He identifies himself as the one who witnessed the death of Orestes and says he must bear the message to the mistress of the house. Electra demands that he her sight, revealing that she is not one of those who rejoice in the news but agonizes over the thought that Orestes can never return. When Orestes asks again who she is, Electra tells him. He can scarcely believe that the exhausted, ravaged, wild-eyed woman who has been clawing in the dirt can be the gentle, refined young woman he recalls as his sister. He reveals to her that Orestes is alive, and when she assumes that he must be injured and in danger somewhere, the stranger reveals that he, in fact, is Orestes, her brother. She is skeptical until an old

servant rushes into the courtyard and kisses the feet of the "messenger." Then, in her excitement she cries out, and nearly gives him away.

Electra tells Orestes how the guilt of living when her father's life has been taken has ravaged her beauty, stolen her pride and left her with nothing to live for but the prospect of vengeance. She is ashamed to have him look upon her. The old Tutor who accompanied Orestes in his enters the courtyard, and any doubt she may have had about the messenger's identity disappears. Electra's joy is so complete that the Tutor has to stifle her happy cries.

Orestes tells Electra that the gods have sent him to enact the vengeance, and that they will condemn him if he shrinks from his duty. Admitting that he cannot look at his mother's face as he kills her, Orestes nevertheless does not hesitate, and he and the Tutor go without hesitation into the palace while Electra waits in terrible suspense outside. In agony she realizes she has not been able to give Orestes the axe. Through the door, she hears Clytemnestra's piercing cry, then a second cry. Servants come running from their quarters, as does Chrysothemis, and while they know something violent has happened behind the door Electra shields with her body, they do not know what. When they hear Aegisthus approaching, they flee back to their quarters.

Electra greets Aegisthus humbly, bearing a torch and bowing before him. When he asks to see the messengers who have brought the news that Orestes is dead, she tells him that they are inside the palace, and escorts him to the door, dancing around him with the torch. Though he is suspicious of her sudden change in demeanor, he is eager to hear the news first-hand, and enters the palace. Soon after, he begins to shout for help, saying that he is being murdered. When he asks if no one hears his cries, Electra answers that her murdered father hears the cries. At last, Aegisthus falls silent.

Chrysothemis returns to the courtyard. She reports that she has seen her brother and that the faithful servants who have long hated and feared Aegisthus are now circled around him kissing his feet, having slain all those who turned against Agamemnon years before. Chrysothemis finds Electra shrunk into the doorsill, drained and immobile, and exhorts her to join them. Electra knows she must be the one to lead the victory celebration, and with great difficulty gathers her strength and begins a wild dance, calling upon everyone to join her. She dances a few more tense steps before collapsing to the ground, where she lies rigid. Chrysothemis pounds on the door of the palace, calling out for Orestes.

## Analysis

When an author chooses to retell an old story, the obvious first question is, "Why?" In this case, the story of Electra has been told many times, both directly and as part of more far-reaching stories of the larger family drama that include tales of Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia, and of the gods demanding that Orestes exact revenge only to have the Furies pursue him for his crime, all within the context of the Trojan War. No two versions can ever be exactly the same. The writer colors the story at

every turn, magnifying this point, altering this character, and even changing the endings. Such is the case with this play, which Hugo von Hofmannstahl identifies in the subtitle as "freely rendered after Sophocles." He might have chosen to base it on the works Euripides or Aeschylus works as well, but chose the Sophoclean version for very specific reasons. What this new author brings to the old story, making it different from the classic versions of the old Greek poets is, quite simply, twenty-four centuries of change—in how people looked at society, at themselves, and even at "modern" theater. These changes colored von Hofmannsthal's view of the underlying themes and the main actions of the story.

The story as told by Euripides and Aeschylus centers on the matricide, both as a central part of the action and as a moral dilemma. The other acts—Orestes returning disguised as the witness to his own "death," the delay with which Electra and Orestes come to recognize each other, the dialogues with Chrysothemis and Clytemnestra—carry much less of the dramatic weight in those plays. The murder of Clytemnestra is the main event. Sophocles, in contrast, was less concerned with the moral question of whether or not killing one's mother was justifiable, and more interested in the dramatic possibilities of the interplay among the queen's offspring. By focusing more on the events leading up to the murder of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus than on the bloody act itself, Sophocles all but ignored the moral dilemma to explore justice and vengeance his central themes. By basing his version of the story "freely" on the Sophocles version, von Hofmannstahl gave his play a similar focus. Yet he wrote *Electra* in Vienna during the 1900s, when Sigmund Freud's works and theories were popular discussion topics among the intellectuals and artists in the playwright's circle. Thus von Hofmannstahl develops his themes of justice and vengeance by examining the psychological toll that the obsession with revenge exacts on the title character.

Everything the author adds to or leaves out from his version of the Electra story serves to focus the story intensely on the idea that the violent murder of Agamemnon has left his surviving family members figuratively scarred, and that their wounds have festered for years until they have so poisoned the atmosphere that it seems the only hope for healing is retribution. Thus, while the classic versions, including the one by Sophocles, give us information that explains Clytemnestra's motives for killing her husband (among them her anger that Agamemnon sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia to further his own ambitions), the modern play makes no mention of that betrayal, thus removing any sense of compassion for Clytemnestra and keeping the story from getting sidetracked by any debate about the morality of blood for blood—especially one's mother's blood.

Ignoring Clytemnestra's possible justifications for her actions naturally makes Electra the more sympathetic figure. This sympathy is amplified by von Hofmannsthal's contrast between the changes in the queen and in Electra over the ten years since the murder of Agamemnon. Clytemnestra, who has grown powerful and haughty, is now steeped in brutality, sacrificing any living person or creature in rituals that she believes might ward off the spreading "rot" within her; keeping her daughters locked away from their peers; whipping the servants; and even beating Electra and making her eat alongside the dogs. In contrast, Electra, whom we know from her own description and that of Orestes was once beautiful, refined and gentle—"animals steal timidly around her dwelling and

nestle against her robe when she goes by"—has been humbled and debased. She is now a filthy, hollow-eyed, wretch, more animal than person in her appearance, behavior and single-mindedness.

Though the son, Orestes, plays a central role—he does, after all, perform the actual deed that releases both Clytemnestra and Electra from their respective torments—it is the psychological study of the three main female figures that makes von Hofmannsthal's play so different from the classical versions and yet equally powerful. He draws for us a portrait of three women, each pathetic and paralyzed in her own unique way.

Clytemnestra, having found no peace through her treachery and now finding herself trapped in a disastrous marriage to a cruel and selfish man, cannot even remember the act that brought her to such a state. As she finds herself wracked with debilitating nightmares and daytime terrors, her ability to speak, think clearly, and remember has rendered her infirm and ineffective as a queen, and she spends most of her time trying to "cure" her disintegration and rot with blood sacrifices, totems and rituals.

Chrysothemis, whose greatest desire is to marry and bear children, cannot do so because she is confined to the palace and not allowed access to the attentions of marriageable men. Her sense of powerlessness arises from seeing and feeling herself age, knowing that with each passing day her dreams of maternity fade further away. The possibility that she may never fulfill her dream weighs heavily on her as it reminds her of her own mortality: "For it is not water which is rushing by, and it is not yarn which is rolling off, rolling off the spool; it is I, I!" she cries in despair. She blames Electra's crazed obsession with vengeance for her own loss, and this—as much as fear of harm or retribution—is perhaps why she refuses to help Electra kill Clytemnestra when they believe that Orestes is dead.

The most thoroughly paralyzed, incapacitated character in this more modern play is, of course, Electra herself. Though we find the von Hofmannsthal's Electra loathsome to behold, we cannot help but pity her for her tragic obsession. For a decade she has devoted her every waking thought to the moment when she can avenge her father's murder. She has spurned all thoughts of a normal life. When Orestes looks at her sadly and lovingly, she rebuffs his kindness, and describes herself as one who has, in essence, turned her hatred into an almost living thing, one with which she has consorted and by which she is consumed; in her own tortured mind, she has been the wife of a demon and given birth to despair, forsaking even the possibility of any future relationship with a human man. (Incidentally, some critics have pointed out that in von Hofmannsthal's play, the role of the relationship between Aegisthus and Clytemnestra as a prime motivation in the murder of her father has made Electra something of a misandrist, and even interpreted Electra's relationship with Chrysothemis as having homoerotic undercurrents.) Yet when the time comes to carry out the murder, she unhesitatingly allows Orestes to take on the active role, not even offering her assistance. In fact, although she does "guard" the door to the palace, she even fails to give Orestes the axe she has been saving since Agamemnon's murder to use on his murderer. She has imagined the act for ten years, yet in the end, she cannot act. The

most she can do, after Clytemnestra's first piercing cry from behind the palace door, is stand with her back to the door and cry out herself, "Once more, strike!"

Electra's character reflects many of Freud's emerging theories of the times, including his assertion that everything in our lives—what we dream, think, say and do—is layered with symbolic meaning. In this context, Electra's monomaniacal existence foretells her own fate: if her reason for living is to see her mother killed, what reason has she to go on once Clytemnestra is dead? Indeed, after her "nameless dance" and "a few more steps of the tensest triumph," she collapses, rigid, to the ground. Is she "really" dead? It hardly matters. She has lived out her own self-appointed purpose. As another avenging royal so progeny so aptly phrased it, "The rest is silence."

# Characters

## Aegisthus

Aegisthus is the lover of Clytemnestra, and together they killed Clytemnestra's husband, Agamemnon. Aegisthus is presented as a weak man and a bully. One of the servants says that he beats Electra. Electra refers to him as a woman, and speaks sarcastically of "that brave murderer." Aegisthus appears only near the end of the play and is murdered by Orestes as soon as he goes into the house.

## Chrysothemis

Chrysothemis is Electra's younger sister. She is a gentler spirit than Electra and unlike her sister, she is not obsessed by the murder of her father. She is, however, deeply disturbed by her current situation. Frightened and confused by day and night, she cannot remain still and runs from room to room. She feels as if she is lost to herself and blames Electra for the fact that they are both confined to the palace. If Electra were not so unmanageable, Chrysothemis says, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus would let them out of what she calls their prison. She longs to escape so that she can lead a normal life. Her great desire is to marry and bear children, but she is conscious that she is no longer young and life is slipping by. She is frightened when Electra discloses her scheme of vengeance and refuses to take part in it, even though Electra, who has the more dominating personality, tries to force her into compliance.

## Clytemnestra

Clytemnestra is the mother of Electra, Chryso themis, and Orestes. With her lover, Aegisthus, she murdered her husband Agamemnon after he returned from the Trojan War. Clytemnestra, who is pale and wears a scarlet robe, is tormented by guilt, even though she cannot remember anything about the murder of her husband. The incident was so traumatic that she has repressed all memory of it. Now, her relationship with Aegisthus appears to have turned sour and she feels she is sinking into chaos, enduring a kind of living death. At night, before she goes to sleep, a dreadful feeling creeps over her. She does not know what it is, "and yet / it is so terrible that my soul / wishes it were hanged and every limb of mine longs for death." Then when she sleeps, she has terrible nightmares, and she wonders why the gods are inflicting such torments upon her. During the day, she can hardly keep her eyes open, sometimes she feels giddy and she leans on her confidante for support. Her attendants give her contradictory diagnoses about what ails her. Some believe she has a diseased liver; others say that demons are sucking her blood.

Clytemnestra is determined to put an end to her nightmares, and adorns herself with jewels and charms to ward off the evil influences. She also believes that if she performs the correct ritual sacrifice, the gods will release her from her pain. All in all,

Clytemnestra is a fearsome figure, and her servants, as well as Chrysothemis, are afraid of her. She ill-treats Electra, subjecting her to whippings and humiliations. But Electra seems to be the only one who is not intimidated by her.

## The Confidante

Clytemnestra's attendant, the confidante, dresses in dark violet and carries an ivory staff adorned with jewels. Clytemnestra supports herself on the confidante's arm and takes advice from her constantly. When Electra appears to be speaking reasonably to Clytemnestra, her confidante warns her that Electra does not mean what she says. But this time, Clytemnestra rejects the confidante's words.

## The Cook

The cook makes only one brief appearance. He talks with the young manservant and also warns Electra and Chrysothemis that Orestes is dead and they must be careful or they will be next.

## Electra

Electra is the daughter of Clytemnestra, the sister of Chrysothemis and Orestes. She is completely obsessed with avenging the death of her father, Agamemnon. Every day at sunset, she mourns him. The memory of the murder and her desire for revenge obliterates everything else in her mind and heart. Electra used to be beautiful, quiet and gracious, but the torments of grief, her lust for vengeance, and the ill-treatment she has suffered has affected her appearance. Her eyes look frightful because of her lack of sleep and her stare is ferocious. She is dressed in rags with bare arms and legs. Because of Clytemnestra's enmity, Electra has been fed with scraps, whipped, and threatened with imprisonment and chains. But none of this deflects her from her purpose, and she longs for the time when she can kill her mother and Aegisthus. She then plans to perform a victory dance around her father's grave. After she hears the false report of Orestes' death, Electra tries to persuade her sister Chrysothemis to assist in the murder, but Chrysothemis refuses. Ironically, at the climax of the play, it is not Electra but Orestes who does the killing. Electra seems to be full of words but incapable of deeds. Her mental torment has resulted in a serious warping of her personality, in which passion and hysteria convince her that the fulfillment of her entire being rests solely on the performance of one bloody act of vengeance.

## Matron

The matron supervises the servants as they draw water from the well. She is as hostile to Electra as well as most of the servants and reminds them that Electra spat at them and said their children were cursed simply because they had been born in the same house where the murder took place.

## Orestes

Orestes is the son of Clytemnestra and the brother of Electra and Chrysothemis. After the murder of Agamemnon, when he was still a boy, he was sent away from the palace. Clytemnestra believes that he is feeble-witted and will not return, although she trembles when his name is mentioned. Electra believes that Clytemnestra paid in gold to have Orestes murdered, but she does not believe he is dead, even when his death is reported by the messengers. When Orestes does return to the palace with his tutor, he does not disclose his identity. He meets Electra, but he has been gone so long the two do not recognize each other. Orestes pretends that he is visiting to confirm the death of Orestes, but when he is recognized by a servant, the truth comes out. After this, Orestes does not hesitate to carry out the vengeance that he believes is his duty, killing Clytemnestra and then Aegisthus.

## The Trainbearer

Clytemnestra's trainbearer is a yellow figure with black hair. She resembles an Egyptian woman and also is like an upright snake. She speaks only briefly but hisses when she does.

## Tutor

Orestes' tutor, a vigorous old man with flashing eyes, accompanies Orestes when he returns to the royal palace. When Electra recognizes him, she realizes that the man with him must indeed be Orestes. It is the tutor who tells Orestes that Aegisthus is not at home and it is time to strike Clytemnestra.

## Women Servants

The women servants appear at the beginning of the play, when they draw water from a well. They all describe how unpleasant Electra has become. But one very young servant defends Electra, and says that the others are not worthy of breathing the same air as the princess.

## A Young Servant

A young manservant rides out to inform Aegisthus that Orestes is dead, and also to escort him home. He is coarse and impatient and insults the other servants.

# Themes

## Justice and Vengeance

The play embodies the idea of retributive justice, of blood for blood. An act of wrongdoing can be put right only by a similar act carried out against the original perpetrator. The sole focus of the play is therefore on vengeance and nothing distracts from this theme: the killing of Agamemnon has created a wound that will not heal; it has perverted the natural order of things, which must be put right. Although the situation would appear to be complicated by the fact that one of the intended victims is the mother of the avengers, this in fact, makes little difference, other than to ratchet up the intensity of the drama. The question of whether the killing is morally justifiable is not debated; it is presented through the character of Electra as self-evidently the case. In this, von Hofmannsthal simplified his source, for in Sophocles' play *Electra,* Clytemnestra explains why she killed her husband, citing Agamemnon's sacrifice of her daughter Iphigenia. She claims to have justice on her side.

Von Hofmannsthal, however, gives Clytemnestra no such moments to offer her case. She is presented as a mentally ill woman who cannot even remember the murder she committed. Furthermore, in von Hofmannsthal's version, the audience is encouraged to automatically take Electra's side by showing much more directly than Sophocles the kind of evil that flourishes in the royal palace. Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, having attained power by an act of brutality, maintain it in similar fashion. The servant girl who expresses support of Electra is hauled off and whipped offstage, and Clytemnestra's entrance is accompanied by a chilling stage direction that leaves no doubt about the prevalence in the house of cruelty and perversity:

A hurried procession passes the glaringly lit up windows
clanking and shuffling by: it is a tugging and
dragging of animals, a muted scolding, a quickly
stifled scream, the whistling sound of a whip, a
recovering and staggering onward.

Who then could argue with the idea that Clytemnestra's autocratic and cruel reign is an open, festering sore (to use an image that fits the mood of the play) and that justice demands its removal?

## Obsession and Fulfillment of the Self

In Sophocles' *Electra*, Electra is a hard and embittered figure, but she presents her case rationally. Von Hofmannsthal's Electra is a woman obsessed by one thing and one thing only which she expresses in the most lurid terms imaginable. She can think of nothing other than her father's death (which took place ten years previously) and she eagerly

anticipates the moment when she will wreak vengeance on her mother. There is simply no space in Electra's mind for anything other than this. Her very first speech, for example, is a fifty-seven line monologue addressed directly to her father as Electra looks down at the ground.

Electra's tragedy is that, unlike her sister Chrysothemis, she is unable to forget. She is doomed to remember. And in that act of remembrance, everything else that she once was is obliterated. As she says to Orestes, "Look, I am / nothing at all. All that I was I have / had to surrender." She lives, she says, but at the same time she does not live. She no longer has a self. Her life has in a sense become an impersonal one in that it has been subordinated to keeping the account of what has been done and what remains to be done in the future. However, the loss of her personal life is, paradoxically, the fulfillment of her being (at least in her own eyes). Her purpose has become larger than herself: she must carry out the will of the gods, obey the law of guilt and retribution and that alone justifies her existence. When it is done, she has no reason to go on living, no reason to speak another word. She must simply be silent and dance.

# Style

## Imagery

There are a few recurring images or motifs in the play that vividly bring out its themes. The first set of images relates to animals. The images convey the idea that in the world of the play, human life has lost its dignity and has descended to an inferior level of creation. The light of reason and of love has been snuffed out.

The animal imagery appears throughout the play. On Electra's first appearance, before she even speaks, the stage direction states that she "bounds back like an animal into its hiding place." Other actions of Electra suggest that of an animal. A servant reports that she once broke into howls and threw herself into a corner. Late in the play, she digs in the ground "like an animal" to find the axe with which to kill Clytemnestra. The servants compare her to a wild cat; her fingers are likened to claws. Clytemnestra speaks of her, using the impersonal pronoun, in serpent imagery: "How it rears up with swelling neck / and darts its tongue at me!"

Electra uses similar imagery herself. She refers to the servants as "flies," and Clytemnestra's attendants as "reptiles." (The stage directions state that the trainbearer resembles an "upright snake.") She says that she is feeding a vulture in her body and she also compares herself to a dog snapping at the heels of its prey.

The same imagery is applied to other characters. Clytemnestra speaks of Chrysothemis as running away "like a frightened dog"; Chrysothemis howls "loudly like a wounded animal"; and Clytemnestra imagines Orestes sprawling in the yard with the dogs, unable to "tell man and beast apart."

There is one brief moment when the dramatist uses the same imagery to completely different effect, as when Orestes recalls his sister before the murder blighted their lives: "animals steal timidly around her dwelling / and nestle against her robe when she goes by." This gentle, almost pastoral image suggests the former natural order of things, before murder disrupted it. But now humans have become like animals.

Another recurring batch of images centers around blood. This imagery reinforces the main theme of vengeance, since that can only be accomplished through the shedding of blood. Electra's first speech, for example, is saturated with this kind of imagery. She addresses her dead father and envisions the moment when revenge has been accomplished by her and her two siblings:

we three, when all this is done and purple tents
have been raised by the haze of the blood
which the sun sucks upward to itself, then
we, your blood, will dance around your grave.

The word blood in this passage has two meanings: the blood that is shed by Clytemnestra and the ties of kinship the three avengers have with their murdered father.

Blood and animal imagery combine in Electra's words of scorn to the servants. The matron reports that Electra said nothing is as accursed "as children which, like animals, slithering about / in blood on the stairs, we have conceived and born / here in this house."

There are also recurring references to the eyes—the organ that can behold such terrible deeds as a wife's murder of her husband, and that can communicate to another what lies in the depth of the soul. Linked to this are the many references to looking or gazing. This suggests the meeting of one pair of eyes with another, which for the principle characters may be almost impossible to endure. No one, not even Clytemnestra or Aegisthus, can endure the intense gaze of Electra, for example, and Orestes cannot bear to look into his mother's eyes before he kills her.

## Staging and Lighting

The staging and lighting work to reinforce the themes of the play. According to von Hofmannsthal, the set should convey a sense of claustrophobia, narrowness, and enclosure, giving the feeling that there is no escape. In addition to the royal palace and the lowly buildings that house the servants, there is to the right an enormous fig tree. Its appearance may well be grotesque with gnarled, intertwined branches all twisted up and distorted. This well suggests the idea of a family bound together by blood but twisted into unnatural shapes and relationships. The fig tree also helps to create an atmosphere of gloom and foreboding. The stage direction when Electra is about to give her first speech reveals the symbolic importance of this element of the staging: "She is alone with the patches of red light which fall like bloodstains from the branches of the fig tree." This shows that the drama begins in the early evening, as the sun sets.

In the lighting effects, light and dark alternate. When Clytemnestra enters, she is accompanied by glaring light from torches, but her confrontation with Electra takes place only by a faint light coming from the house, which from time to time falls on the two women. It is in a shadowy, dark world that they converse. Light returns when the false news is brought of Orestes's death. The stage directions read: "the courtyard becomes bright with lights and a red-yellow glare floods the walls." This conveys at once Clytemnestra's moment of apparent triumph and the sinister nature of it.

Then, it is dark again until the arrival of Orestes, who enters from the courtyard door, "his figure set off in black against the last gleam of light." In other words, Orestes is a ray of light from the outside world that has managed to penetrate the palace and can therefore resolve the situation. At the end of the play, the stage is lit up with torches—a thousand of them, according to Chrysothemis—to show that the dark evil has been exorcised.

## Theatrical Conventions

The play observes the three unities of time, place, and action. This was a concept of dramatic structure that derived in part from Aristotle and was completed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The unities require that the actions represented by the play take place over a period of not more than one day, at a single location, with all the action focusing on a single plot. There are no subplots, comic characters or other diversions. The play also observes the convention of Greek drama that violent acts are reported rather than being shown directly on stage. For this reason, the killing of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus is not shown directly.

# Historical Context

## Turn of the Century Vienna

In the 1890s, the dominant mood in von Hofmannsthal's hometown of Vienna, the capital of the great Habsburg Empire, was that of uncertainty. It was clear to many that the Habsburg monarchy, and the social, cultural and political order that it represented, was entering a crisis period and that its future could not be assured. The liberalism that had prevailed in the politics of the Habsburg Empire from the 1860s was virtually over by 1900. In its place arose reactionary and anti-Semitic forces—a development that worried von Hofmannsthal.

But, far from depressing the city's literary and artistic culture, the coming political disintegration seemed, on the contrary, to encourage it. The period from 1890 to the outbreak of World War I in 1914 produced an unprecedented flowering of Vienna's artistic and intellectual life. There was a spirit of innovation and experiment in the air, of new ways of thinking and creating. This new spirit bore fruit in the music of Gustav Mahler and Arnold Schoenberg; the poetry and drama of von Hofmannsthal and Rainer Maria Rilke (whom von Hofmannsthal met in 1899); the cultural criticism of Karl Kraus; the art of Gustav Klimt and the Secession movement; the Vienna Circle of the logical positivist philosophers, including Ludwig Wittgenstein; and the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, whose famous work, *The Interpretation of Dreams,* was published in 1900. (Von Hofmannsthal owned a copy of Freud's book.)

This golden age of Viennese culture came to an abrupt end when war enveloped Europe. In the aftermath of World War I, the map of Europe was redrawn. The Habsburg Empire and the social order that it represented no longer existed. What was left was the small country of Austria. Von Hofmannsthal, who during the war had served in the Habsburg war ministry in Vienna, found himself having to adapt to a different world. He was deeply disappointed by the collapse of the old order.

## Art for Art's Sake

The Aesthetic Movement of the late nineteenth century, centered in France but had an influence throughout Europe, adopted the slogan, "art for art's sake." The idea was that the only purpose of art was to embody beauty and perfection, which was its own justification. Art needed to have no utilitarian or social value. It was enough that it existed. Many poets of the aesthetic movement, which included the young von Hofmannsthal in the 1890s, felt that their purpose in life was to pursue beauty in a life devoted to art.

The Aesthetic Movement also led to a movement known as the Decadence or the *fin de siècle* (end of the century). Decadent writers lauded art over nature, and explored in their works deviant or bizarre subject matter. They were opposed to accepted social

standards in morality and sexual behavior. A typical work of the Decadence was Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé* (1893), which is notable for its sexual perversity and lurid, violent climax. Von Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* has some decadent elements in common with Wilde's play.

## The House of Atreus in Greek Mythology

Agamemnon was a king of Mycenae. He was a son of Atreus, who had a long-running quarrel with Thyestes. Agamemnon killed a son of Thyestes who was married to Clytemnestra. He also killed their baby and took Clytemnestra as his wife. Clytemnestra bore Agamemnon four children: Iphigenia, Electra, Chrysothemis, and Orestes.

When Clytemnestra's sister, Helen, was abducted by the Trojan prince, Paris, Agamemnon raised a Greek force to win her back. But he angered the goddess Artemis, who used her power over the weather to prevent the departure of the Greek fleet. The only way Artemis could be appeased was through the sacrifice of Agamemnon's eldest daughter, Iphigenia. Telling Clytemnestra that Iphigenia was to be married to Achilles, Agamemnon arranged for the girl to be sent to Aulis to be sacrificed. At the last moment, Artemis placed a stag on the altar instead of Iphigenia and took Iphigenia with her to be her priestess. Clytemnestra was told that Iphigenia had vanished, a story that she refused to believe. The incident aroused her undying hatred of Agamemnon.

When Agamemnon was fighting at Troy, Thyestes' son Aegisthus seduced Clytemnestra. In addition to her distress over Iphigenia, Clytemnestra may have heard reports that Agamemnon was bringing home the Trojan princess Cassandra as a concubine.

When Agamemnon returned from Troy, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus killed him, as well as the two sons that Cassandra had born him. Clytemnestra also killed Cassandra. Orestes would also have been killed had not Electra or some other member of the house managed to send him away to the court of Strophius, king of Phocis.

After Orestes attained manhood, Apollo told him at Delphi that it was his duty to kill both Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. With his friend Pylades, Orestes returned to his former home, made himself known to his sister Electra, and carried out his act of revenge. The Furies (spirits who punished those guilty of crimes against their own family) pursued Orestes and drove him mad. Orestes wandered to Delphi to consult Apollo, who had ordered him to commit the murders, and Apollo sent him to Athens, where he was tried and acquitted by a jury.

Orestes and Electra are principal characters in *The Libation Bearers* and *The Eumenides,* two plays by the ancient Greek dramatist Aeschylus. They are also the subjects of Sophocles's *Electra* and Euripides's *Electra* and *Orestes.*

# Critical Overview

The initial production of *Electra*, which premiered on October 30, 1903, in Berlin, was von Hofmannsthal's first major theatrical success. Within four days, three editions of the book were sold out, and twenty-two German theaters expressed an interest in producing the play.

Critics were divided, however. Von Hofmannsthal wrote in a letter to his brother-in-law that some were enthusiastic, others hostile. Those who passed negative judgments thought that the play did not measure up to the dignified calm that they believed was part of the ancient Greek spirit. They argued that the modernization of Sophocles' play to incorporate psychological theories had made Electra into a savage character. In addition, Electra's relationship with her sister was condemned because of its erotic, lesbian overtones.

Other critics thought that the modernization was legitimate, given the popularity and importance of Freud's psychological theories. These critics tended to focus on the concept of "hysteria," as defined by Freud, and as seen in the characters Electra and Clytemnestra.

For some years, *Electra* continued to be regularly performed by many theater companies. It was even performed in Japanese. Today, however, performances of the play are rare events. It is now known chiefly as the libretto of Richard Strauss's opera, *Elektra* (1909), which is part of the standard operatic repertoire. Strauss had seen the original production of the play in Berlin and asked von Hofmannsthal to create a libretto from it that he could set to music. Von Hofmannsthal made some changes to the original play to fit the demands of the operatic form. He reduced the length of the monologues and expanded the scene between Electra and Orestes. He also gave Electra an ecstatic duet with Chrysothemis, after Clytemnestra and Aegisthus are killed in which Electra sings that she is the fire of life. Von Hofmannsthal is today recognized as one of the finest librettists in operatic history.

The play, however, still continues to occupy the attention of scholars, whose arguments tend to reflect the same critical debate that was sparked by the play's first production. In 1938, E. M. Butler wrote that the Freudian elements seriously damaged the play, which she referred to as "turgid spiritual melodrama" (quoted in Michael Hamburger's introduction to von Hofmannsthal's *Selected Plays and Libretti*). But other modern critics have found the Freudian elements in the play, such as Electra's fixation on her father and the idea of repressed memory as applied to Clytemnestra, to be fruitful ground for examination. Critics have also contrasted von Hofmannsthal's play with the play by Sophocles on which it is loosely based.

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

# Critical Essay #1

*Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth-century literature. In this essay, Aubrey discusses the psychological elements of the play with emphasis on Freudian psychoanalysis.*

"My main incentive is not to let bygone ages be wholly dead, and to make people feel that what is remote and alien is closely related to themselves." So wrote von Hofmannsthal (quoted in Robert Mark's article in *Opera News*) of his adaptations of Greek tragedies. He certainly set himself quite a task. Appreciating such a grim, bleak, violent play as *Electra* requires a leap of imagination into a world very different from our own. Perhaps a comparison with a more familiar revenge tragedy, *Hamlet,* might be helpful. There are many similarities between the two plays. Like Electra, Hamlet has had a dearly loved father murdered and must, by the code of his society, avenge his death. Like Electra, Hamlet must kill a relative (although Hamlet must kill his uncle, not his mother, to do so). Hamlet's mind, like Electra's, is placed under enormous strain by the Herculean task imposed upon him. And like Electra, Hamlet develops a revulsion against all sexuality because his mother is having sexual relations with a criminal usurper.

The ancient Greek tragedians who dramatized the Agamemnon-Orestes-Electra myth were deeply concerned with the question of justice. The final play of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy entirely concerns Orestes's guilt or innocence. After being pursued by the Furies, Orestes is finally acquitted by the goddess Athena, and the long cycle of violence is brought to an end. Sophocles also, in his play *Electra,* appears to have believed that the killing of Clytemnestra and her lover was justified, a view also emphatically presented by Homer in the *Odyssey.*

Von Hofmannsthal does not have the same interest as Aeschylus in examining the issue of justice from all sides. He does not seem to bring the justice of Electra's vengeance into question, although it could be argued that the abrupt ending of the play is suggestive, as Chrysothemis bangs on the door calling for Orestes but receives no reply. Perhaps already the Furies are pursuing him.

Von Hofmannsthal's approach to the myth is a different one entirely. As befits a man writing in Vienna at the time that Freud was delving into the uncharted waters of the subconscious, von Hofmannsthal is concerned more with psychology than ethics or morality. It is as if he takes the smooth textures of the ancient dramas and asks himself, what is really going on in the subconscious depths of these characters' minds? What has been the psychological effect on them of the killing of Agamemnon?

That the effect has been traumatic and devastating on at least three of the main characters—Clytemnestra, Electra and Chrysothemis—is obvious. The one moment in which the terrible destructive act—the killing of Agamemnon—took place has in effect frozen time for Clytemnestra and Electra. They cannot get beyond that moment and its consequences. Their lives are like dammed up rivers where the pressure continues to

build but there is no way of releasing it. They are locked in a deadly struggle that is destroying them both.

Interestingly, the few positive, life-affirming images in the play are of flowing water. These are supplied by Chrysothemis, who has reacted to the tragedy that has enveloped her family quite differently than Electra. That is not to say that she is not deeply distressed. She is. She tells Electra that she is terrified; she runs from room to room as if a voice were calling her; she cannot find relief even in tears. But unlike Electra, she is not fixated on the past. She wants to be part of the world of becoming, the natural cycle of growth and change. She wants to fulfill her role as a woman and give birth to a child. She wants life to flow freely again, out of the death-grip that holds her mother and sister immobile in a nightmare past that consumes their present and offers them no future. Chrysothemis uses the image of cleansing water to express her desire to be free of the past: "I will wash my body / in every water; I will plunge deep down / into every water; I will wash each part of me."

Disturbed, frightened and desperate she may be, but Chrysothemis represents the hope that whatever the past, life will flow once more and new births will ease the memory of old deaths. Electra herself, in her second long dialogue with her sister, recognizes that Chrysothemis is the one who still has energetic life flowing through her. She contrasts Chrysothemis' youthfulness and physical strength, which "flows like cool / pent-up water from the rock" (the water image again) with her own wasted body, her "wretched withered arms."

Chrysothemis, of course, is unwilling to go along with what her sister wants her to do. She blames Electra for their joint imprisonment, and simply wants Electra to change her attitude. But that is like asking her to alter the laws of her being, to be a different person entirely. It is not going to happen. And Chrysothemis' willingness to "move on with her life" (as the modern phrase has it), although attractive on the surface, is in fact not really a solution to the problem. It leaves the impasse between Clytemnestra and Electra in place.

How does von Hofmannsthal tackle this thorny situation? How can that moment of "frozen time" that holds Clytemnestra and Electra in its grip be melted? As Lorna Martens has pointed out in her article, "The Theme of the Repressed Memory in Hofmannsthal's Elektra," he turned for inspiration to Freud. In particular, he read Freud's *Studies in Hysteria* (1895) and *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900).

Freud's theory was that traumatic events are repressed by the conscious mind. The memories do not disappear but become lodged in the unconscious mind, from where they create neurotic symptoms in the personality. It is clear that Clytemnestra is suffering from repressed memory because she cannot recall the moment of the murder. This is how she describes that moment to Electra:

There he stood
of whom you always talk, there he stood
and here stood I and Aegisthus,

and from eye to eye our glances met:
so it had not happened yet! and then
your father's dying look altered
so slowly and horribly, but still
fastened to mine—and then it had happened:
there is no space in between! Now it was
before, and then it was past—in between
I did nothing.

As Martens points out, it is Electra who represents the memory of the act of murder that Clytemnestra is repressing. Since the memory of this awful act is now stuck in Clytemnestra's unconscious mind, it is having an insidious, poisonous effect on her whole being. She knows that something is wrong. "I rot inside," says Clytemnestra, and this accounts for the symptoms of hysteria which she exhibits.

These symptoms include hallucinations—Clytemnestra has hallucinations of Electra as a snake—nightmares, and the loss of the ability to use language at vital moments. In Clytemnestra's long speech to Electra when they are alone together, for example, Clytemnestra complains that she can find no words to answer Aegisthus when he mocks her. She reaches for the words, but they are not there. Also, according to Martens, Clytemnestra's entry, in which she supports herself on a stick and can hardly keep her eyes open, suggests a condition of "hysterical paralysis." Taken as a whole, Clytemnestra's symptoms of hysteria, which also include confusion and dizziness, make her resemble one of Freud's most famous patients, a woman named Anna O.

Martens notes that Electra also has symptoms of hysteria, and also resembles Anna O. This can be seen especially in her excessive attachment to a dead, beloved father, her preoccupation with reliving the past, and the fact that both the fictional character and real-life psychiatric patient experience symptoms of the disorder daily at sunset (this is the time each day when Electra mourns her father and relives the murder).

It is a sign of how von Hofmannsthal's symbolic meanings overlap that Electra, herself resembling a hysteric, also resembles the psychoanalyst. In Freudian psychoanalysis, the analyst keeps probing and investigating the psyche of the patient until the memory of the original trauma is uncovered. This, in theory anyway, frees the patient from the trauma's grip. This is why Clytemnestra senses that Electra, who keeps tormenting her, also has the ability to cure her. And Electra badgers her mother again and again about the original deed, trying like a psychoanalyst to get the buried memory to come to light. This is also symbolized both verbally and visually by Electra's feverish digging for the axe that killed Agamemnon. Interestingly, Freud sometimes used the analogy of an archeological dig to convey the work of the psychoanalyst, who has to dig through all the layers of the mind to discover the basic structures that have made it what it is.

Such is the basic Freudian approach to the play, and there is no doubt that it digs deeply into von Hofmannsthal's intended meanings. Whether, either in the early 1900s or now, a hundred years later, it fulfills von Hofmannsthal's goal of making "people feel

that what is remote and alien is closely related to themselves" is another matter. Perhaps the answer, in spite of the extreme nature of the subject matter, is yes. Methods of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy have proliferated since Freud's day, but many of them still work on the same premise. The theory is that if some traumatic event or process that has been pushed back into the unconscious mind is brought to conscious awareness, it will automatically lose its power to produce neurosis in the personality. That which is known, and can be contemplated in the light of day, is less powerful than that which lurks undetected and unknown. The trauma can be anything from, say, sexual abuse as a child to something perhaps less serious, such as how the family dynamic—the relationship between the parents and their relationship with the children—operated to create the problem that is being addressed by the therapist.

This kind of intervention by a psychiatrist or psychotherapist might be thought of as the "Electra solution" to psychic disturbance, if Electra is viewed in her role as the preserver of memory. It is the solution she tries to force on Clytemnestra: face the monster and he will lose his fangs. An alternative, less attractive, attitude to inner turmoil might be Electra in her role as hysteric, endlessly and morbidly dwelling on the traumatic events of the past. A third possibility might be thought of as the "Chrysothemis solution": get immersed in life and make the best of things, perhaps with the attitude that "it all happened a long time ago." A fourth possibility of course is Orestes' solution. He wastes little time on words and simply takes action to get the job done. These four different approaches might be thought of as confront, brood, forget, act. Of such stuff is the drama of life made.

**Source:** Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on *Electra,* in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2003.

*In the following essay excerpt, Mueller explores the influence of both Greek and contemporary drama on Hofmannsthal's* Electra.

*Electra* was Hugo von Hofmannsthal's first major success on the public stage. The play was first performed at Max Reinhardt's Little Theatre in Berlin on October 30, 1903. On November 10, Hofmannsthal wrote to his brother-in-law that it had had a great success with three editions out of print, twenty-two adoptions by public stages, and a noisy reception from the press, partly enthusiastic, partly hostile. *Electra* kept its place in the repertoire. Some years later, Hofmannsthal authorized a Japanese club to perform it in Japanese and casually referred to performances of his play on "hundreds of stages." Today, *Electra* survives chiefly in a cut and slightly altered form as the libretto of Strauss's opera.

*Electra* was not Hofmannsthal's first or only stab at Greek tragedy. A decade earlier, the nineteen-year-old student had tried his hand at Euripides' *Alcestis.* A little more than a translation and a little less than a new version, this play presents a very lyrical and decorous Euripides, with the buffoonery of Heracles toned down, and some poetic *fin-de-siècle* additions about the deep relationships of life and death. *Electra* marked the beginning of several years' preoccupation with Greek myths. It was followed by *Oedipus and the Sphinx* and a translation of *Oedipus Rex*, which Hofmannsthal at one time

considered parts of a trilogy to be rounded off by a one-act play on the old Oedipus. There are quite systematic sketches for a drama on Pentheus, as well as less elaborate sketches for plays on Leda and the Swan, Jupiter and Semele, and King Kandaules. Hofmannsthal returned to Greek mythology again in two of his opera libretti: *Ariadne auf Naxos* and *Die ägyptische Helena*.

One should not, however, overestimate the rigor or coherence of Hofmannsthal's interest in Greek tragedy and mythology. He learned Greek at the Gymnasium and was by all accounts a phenomenally gifted and precocious student. References to volumes of Pindar, Herodotus, and Sophocles in his correspondence show that he continued to read Greek literature in the original after leaving school. But he was not a Greek scholar like Milton or Racine. He was familiar with some of the fashionable scholarship and criticism of his day, notably Nietzsche, Erwin Rohde's *Psyche,* and Bachofen's work on matriarchy, and he associated this reading with the newfangled work of Freud and Breuer on repression, hysteria, and the unconscious. But the eighteen-year-old admitted in a charming letter to Marie Herzfeld: "meine Bildung ist ein bißchen dilettantenhaft unauseglichen" [my education is rather dilettantish and uneven]. Ten years later, this statement was probably even more accurate, at least as regards Hofmannsthal's classical learning. And his reliance on standard translations is evident in his plays.

While Hofmannsthal was pursuing things Greek, he was also dabbling in several other traditions. Wolfgang Nehring has recently shown that in the early years of the twentieth century, Hofmannsthal tried to find his way as a dramatist by imitating whatever struck his fancy. Them were the Greek subjects, but there were also Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book,* Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserv'd,* the medieval *Everyman,* and Calderón's *Life Is a Dream.* And *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, far from being an unmediated return to ancient myth, was inspired by a play on the same topic by Joséphin Peladan, a contemporary French writer.

The provenance of models suggests an eclectic and indeed haphazard procedure. On the other hand, all of Hofmannsthal's plays from that period are dominated by an obsessive concern with the question of identity and its relationship to sexuality and action. In a letter to Hermann Bahr, he describes his current work on Calderón's *Life Is a Dream* in a phrase that characterizes his entire work during that time: he is concerned "in die tiefsten Tiefen des zweifelhaften Höhlenkönigreiches 'Ich' hinabzusteigen und dort das Nichtmehrich oder die Welt zu finden" [to descend into the lowest depths of the dubious cave kingdom 'I' and to find there the no-longer-I or the world].

The combination of narrow thematic range with a very eclectic choice of models raises some doubts about the usefulness of exploring the relationship of text and subtext in Hofmannsthal's case. But a close examination reveals that Hofmannsthal was a very good reader and that he chose his models with a keen eye for resemblances between their thematic range and his interests.

The title page of Hofmannsthal's *Electra* identifies the play as: "Tragódie in einem Aufzug frei nach Sophokles." In a letter to Rudolf Alexander Schröder, Hofmannsthal

called it "eine freie, sehr freie Bearbeitung der 'Elektra' des Sophokles" [a free, very free adaptation of Sophocles' '*Electra*']. The play, however, is more accurately seen as a version of three very different plays. Its immediate theatre history relates it closely to Oscar Wilde's *Salome.* At the thematic level, the play is a polemical attack on Goethe's *Iphigenie.* The relationship with Sophocles exist superficially at the level of action; the thematic relationship is mediated through both *Salome* and *Iphigenie.*

*Electra* was especially written for Gertrud Eysoldt, who had starred in over 200 performances of Oscar Wilde's *Salome* in the same theatre and, according to the contemporary critic Paul Goldmann, "specialized in perverted women." Hofmannsthal had seen Eysoldt in Gorky's *Lower Depths,* and it was at her urging and Max Reinhardt's that he sat down to carry out plans for the Electra drama that had been on his mind for some time.

The plan to write an Electra play dates to 1901: . . .

> My point of departure was the character of Electra, as I well remember. I read the Sophoclean play in the garden and in the forest, in the fall of 1901. The line from "Iphigenia" came to mind where it says: "Electra with her fiery tongue," and as I walked I fantasized about the figure of Electra, not without some pleasure in the contrast to the "devilishly humane" atmosphere of Iphigenia. The similarity and contrast with Hamlet also went through my mind.

In a diary entry of 17 July 1904, Hofmannsthal gave a very similar account: . . .

> The first idea came in early September 1901. I was reading "Richard III" and Sophocles' "Electra" in order to learn some things for "Pompilia." Immediately the figure of Electra was transformed. The ending was also there at once: that she cannot go on living, that, once the blow has fallen, her life and entrails must rush from her, just as life and entrails together with the fertilizing sting rush from the drone once it has impregnated the queen. The resemblance and contrast to Hamlet were striking. As for style, I thought of doing something opposite from "Iphigenia," something that would not fit the description: "this hellenizing product appeared to me on rereading devilishly humane."

Letters written in 1901 and 1902 continue to refer to plans for this drama, but it was not

until the encounter with Eysoldt and Reinhardt that Hoffmansthal sat down to write the play.

**Electra *and* Salome**

*Salome* and *Electra* are now associated in our minds as Strauss operas. But Hofmannsthal was skittish about the relationship of his play to Wilde's. Strauss apparently became interested in Hofmannsthal's play after seeing a production of it at the Little Theatre in Berlin. When Strauss worried that the two plays might be too similar, Hofmannsthal in a letter disputed his argument: "Es sind zwei Einakter, jeder hat einen Frauennamen, beide spielen im Altertum und beide wurden in Berlin von der Eysoldt kreiert: ich glaube, darauf läuft die ganze Ähnlichkeit hinaus" [They are both one-act plays, each is named after a woman, both are set in antiquity, and both were premièred in Berlin by Eysoldt; I think that is all there is to the resemblances.] This statement clearly understates the similarities and the influence of Wilde's play. Hofmannsthal wrote his play for the Little Theatre in full knowledge that Electra would be played by Gertrud Eysoldt, who was famous for her Salome, and he saw Eysoldt in Gorky's *Lower Depths* while working on his play. The German theatrical history of *Salome* stands squarely behind Hofmannsthal's play.

Wilde's play changes the biblical narrative in important ways. First, Salome is motivated by her own passion for John and acts out of the love/hatred of a rejected woman. Second, Salome is killed at the end. Finally, Wilde elaborates the biblical motif of Salome's dance and gives it an explicitly bloody setting:

HEROD Ah, thou art to dance with naked feet! 'Tis
well! 'Tis well! Thy little feet will be like white doves.
They will be like little white flowers that dance upon
the trees . . . No, no, she is going to dance on blood!
There is blood spilt on the ground. She must not dance
on blood. It were an evil omen.
HERODIAS What is it to thee if she dance on blood?
Thou hast waded deep enough in it. . .
HEROD What is it to me? Ah! look at the moon! she
has become red. She has become red as blood. Ah! the
prophet prophesied truly. He prophesied that the
moon would become as blood. Did he not prophesy it?
All of ye heard him prophesying it. And now the
moon has become as blood. Do ye not see it?

Thus, Wilde's play places a heroine within a complex of themes and motifs that involves sexual frustration, blood, dance, and death. The crazed heroine's fatal dance of death at the moment of triumph has no precedent in Sophocles' play, but it is quite obvious that she conflates central motifs of Wilde's play.

**Electra *and* Iphigenie auf Tauris**

For the German bourgeoisie of the late nineteenth century, the exiled Iphigenia, "seeking the land of the Greeks with her soul," was the great paradigm of neoclassical hellenism, and as such mediated the understanding of Greece as a vision of beauty and serenity. Goethe himself had his doubts about the play. In a letter to Schiller, he spoke of his "hellenizing drama" as "devilishly humane." In his later autobiography, he drew attention to the "dark and terrifying elements" in the background of his play. Goethe's younger contemporary Heinrich von Kleist had responded to these elements in a play modeled on the *Bacchae,* in which he opposed to Iphigenia's Apollonian triumph the Dionysiac and destructive frenzy of Penthesilea.

A very similar protest motivates Hofmannsthal's *Electra*. The deliberate and provocative contrast with Iphigenia was part of the original conception of his protagonist. The point is so obvious at critics have ignored it and have not traced the precise and detailed manner in which the contrast is developed. One might begin with Hofmannsthal's memory of Goethe's phrase about Electra with her fiery tongue, which occurs in Orestes' narrative of the matricide: . . .

Orestes made himself known to Electra;
She fanned the fire of revenge in him
Which in his mother's sacred presence had
Died down to embers. Silently she led
Him to the place at which his father died
And where an old, faint trace of wantonly
Spilled blood still stained the frequently washed floor
With ominous and palely faded streaks.
She there described for him with tongue of fire
Each circumstance of that outrageous deed,
She forced upon him there that ancient dagger
Which had in Tantalus's house raged grimly,
And Clytemnestra died by her son's hand.

The passage contains several motifs that Hofmannsthal develops in detail. None of the ancient versions specifies Orestes' weapon. Goethe resorts to the Gothic motif of a cursed weapon that links the generational sequence of crimes. "[T]hat ancient dagger/Which had in Tantalus's house raged grimly" becomes in Hofmannsthal's drama Clytaemnestra's ax, which Electra guards for her brother's use. More interesting is the phrase:

And where an old, faint trace of wantonly
Spilled blood still stained the frequently washed floor
With ominous and palely faded streaks.

The faint trace of blood may be seen as an image of the distance between Goethe's play and the violence of his sources. Hofmannsthal's play, on the other hand, swims in blood. The deliberate contrast with Goethe is apparent in the opening scene, where a group of maidservants viciously gossip about Electra. They indignantly repeat her accusations, including this one: . . .

to wash
with water and with more and more fresh-drawn
water the everlasting blood of murder
off the floors—

That is a memory, via *Macbeth,* of the Goethean passage. It may also be seen as a return to the theme of blood in the *Oresteia,* especially to the carpet scene of the *Agamemnon,* in which the stage is metaphorically transformed into an ocean of blood. The distinctive aspect of blood in *Electra,* however, is its compulsive association with sexuality, and as we shall see, this association is part of Hofmannsthal's provocative challenge to Goethe.

The opening scene of *Electra* shows us a group of women on a darkly lit stage. When Electra enters, the stage direction specifies: "*sie ist allein mit den Flecken roten Lichtes, die aus den Zweigen des Feigenbaumes schräg über den Boden und auf die Mauern fallen, wie Blutflecke*" [*she is alone with the patches of red light which fall like bloodstains from the branches of the fig tree obliquely across the ground and upon the walls*]. We see the courtyard of an oriental palace, but it is also a red-light district. Sex and violence come together in the image of the maidservants conceiving children on the blood-drenched steps of the palace, in the ambiguous groaning behind closed doors, and in Electra's laconic description of the world around her: "sie kreißen oder sic morden" [they give birth or kill]. That such lurid color is part of findesiècle decadence in the manner of *Salome* requires no further comment. But it is also the answer to Goethe's explicitly asexual construction of classical Greece.

Seventeenth and eighteenth-century dramatists who wrote plays on subjects of Greek tragedy were usually dissatisfied with the limited and unsentimental treatment of love in their sources, and for this reason they would add erotic subplots. Opposition to the indiscriminate use of such sub-plots led to the demand for a "tragédie sans l'amour." Racine, who in his *Phèdre* had given the great portrayal of a woman destroyed by passion, wrote such a play in his *Athalie,* a scriptural drama written for performance by girls in a convent school. The play was very famous in the eighteenth century because it employed ancient dramaturgy with a strict avoidance of any erotic motif. Goethe in his *Iphigenie auf Tauris* took the ideal of the "tragedy without love" one step farther and made it the subject of the play itself. In several eighteenth-century versions of the subject, Iphigenia fends off the advances of unwelcome suitors. Goethe follows this motif when in the first act of his play Iphigenia turns down a marriage proposal from King Thoas. But in Goethe's play alone, this denial is a rejection of marriage as such. To the great tragic heroines destroyed by passion in ancient tragedy, whether Phaedra, Medea, or Dido, Goethe opposed Iphigenia, the saint and sister who rescues Orestes from his madness. The madness of Orestes, however, had been reinterpreted by Racine in sexual terms: the Oreste of *Andromaque* is mad because Hermione does not return his passion. Thus, the psychological reintegration of Goethe's Orestes through the healing power of his sister is itself a psychosexual drama, albeit of a peculiar kind. The saintly humanity of its moral vision rests on a vow of chastity.

The ancient playwrights derived the name "Electra" from "alektron," "without bed." The daughters of the "overbedded" Clytaemnestra are both unbedded, and in a peculiar fashion *Electra*, no less than *Iphigenie auf Tauris,* is a "tragédie sans l'amour." But to the voluntary renunciation of Iphigenia, Hofmannsthal opposes the enforced frustration of Electra. The risqué elements of the play, including Electra's lesbian attack on her sister and the memories of incestuous rape by the ghost of the father, directly parallel the relationship of Goethe's Iphigenia with her father and brother. Iphigenia dwells on the memory of her happy childhood, at the center of which stands the identification of her father as a thoroughly good man. Electra is haunted by the overbearing presence and demand for revenge of a ghoulish father, who visits her at night and "der mich zwang alles zu wissen, wie es zwischen Mann und Weib zugeht" [forced me to know all that goes on between man and woman]—an anti-Goethean move by an inhabitant of turn-of-the-century Vienna. The same is true of the relationship between Electra and Chrysothemis. The sister's selfless and chaste love becomes the paradigm for the relationship of man and woman in Goethe's play. Electra's sisterly love is of a different kind, and surely we are meant to hear Goethe when Electra woos Chrysothemis with the words: . . .

From now on
I will be your sister as I have never
been your sister before!

The intensely and self-consciously claustrophobic atmosphere of *Electra* is also part of the attack on the neoclassical subtext. In his "Scenic Instructions," Hofmannsthal gave "Enge, Unentfliehbarkeit, Abgeschlossenheit" [ narrowness, lack of escapes, enclosedness] as the characteristic features of the setting; and in a letter written shortly after the première, he complained of the play's "compulsive claustrophobia and terrible lack of light."

Hofmannsthal's claustrophobic spaces are generally metaphors of the womb. The cave is the favored image. In *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, the oracle warning Laius against a son takes this form:. . .

Let the king be on his guard
and stand at his wife's bed
armed and with a naked sword
as if at the cave from which his worst enemy
is lurking to burst forth.

Images of this kind are obsessive during Hofmannsthal's works of this period, and sometimes they are involuntarily funny, as in his sketches to a Pentheus drama: . . .

A symbolic motif: that Pentheus does not know his
own palace; not the vault, not the grotto, not the
subterranean ponds, not the shaft that leads into the

mountain through a hatch door, (he stands over it
and calls down: Mother, Mother!)—Cadmus scorns
him for it.

In *Electra*, the cave image appears prominently in a passage in which Electra reacts with disgust to her sister's desire for a normal life as wife and mother: . . .

Fie,
the woman who thinks of it, who calls it by name!
To be the cave the murderer enjoys
after the murder; to play the beast giving,
pleasure to the fouler beast.

The setting of *Electra* in fact consists of a regress of claustrophobic spaces: the palace, the rooms within the palace, Clytaemnestra's womb are arranged like a set of Chinese boxes. Movement within this space is never free of terror: the one servant who admires Electra is pushed through the door into the palace and whipped, and the sound of whips accompanies the procession that surrounds Clytaemnestra's arrival. Flight and chase are also prominent motifs. Twice in the play, Electra envisages the circumstances of Clytaemnestra's death, and on both occasions her death involves a chase. The first time, she thinks of Orestes chasing Clytaemnestra through the basement of the palace to the deepest pit where the ghost of Agamemnon resides. In the second vision, Electra tells Clytaemnestra how Orestes will chase her and how (in circumstances not unlike Pyrrhus's hesitation) she will be suspended in nameless terror until Orestes drops his ax.

Although the association in Hofmannsthal's *Electra* of claustrophobic fear with sexuality is well motivated in terms of his other works from that period, the systematic opposition to the spatial imagination of *Iphigenie auf Tauris* is highly significant. Goethe's asexual drama occurs in a setting that stresses openness and release. The play's opening lines establish the dominant sense of space:

Heraus in eure Schatten, rege Wipfel
Des alten, heilgen, dichtbelaubten Haines, . . .

Enclosure here is benign: moving out of the temple, Iphigenia enters not the open and sunny plain, but the shadowy space of a grove. The play is familiar with terrifying enclosure, the "iron band" that a god forged around the brows of the family of Atreus, the "klanglos-dumpfe Höhlenreich der Nacht" [the soundless dull cave kingdom of night], where Orestes stores the memories of his horrible deed, the prison of his madness. But when at the end of the third act he is cured by his sister, the world lies before him as an open and sunny plain after a thunderstorm, and claustrophobic spaces are evoked only to be banished: . . .

To Tartarus pass the Eumenides,
I hear their going, and they close behind them
The doors of bronze with far-receding thunder.

Iphigenia returns once more to the claustrophobic vision of bondage at the end of the fourth act, when in the *Parzenlied* she conjures up the world of past violence and dwells on the image of Tantalus as the "exiled ancestor in nocturnal caves". But the play moves away from this vision to end in release and liberation.

The sense of space that governs Goethe's play appears in the stage directions of nineteenth-century versions of Greek tragedy with which Hofmannsthal was familiar. In his "Scenic Instructions," Hofmannsthal expressly forbids "jene Sälen, jene breiten Treppenstufen, all jene antikisierenden Banalitäten, welche mehr geeignet sind, zu ernüchtern als suggestiv zul wirken" [those columns, those broad steps, all those hellenizing banalities more suited to sobering up the spectator than to having a suggestive effect]. The space of *Electra* is far from such visions of openness. Just as Hofmannsthal resexualized Goethe's asexual drama, so he foregrounded the claustrophobic terror lurking in its background.

# Critical Essay #3

The Sophoclean *Electra* departs in significant ways from the versions of Aeschylus and Euripides, and as we shall see, it is precisely these departures that Hofmannsthal engages in his version. Although different in all other respects, Aeschylus and Euripides each place the matricide at the dramaturgical and moral center of the play. In both plays, Orestes pretends to be the messenger of his own death and gains entrance into the palace with this disguise. In both plays, the recognition between brother and sister occurs before Orestes carries out his plan. Recognition and disguise are subsidiary features in a plot that moves toward the realization of the horror of matricide as its central event.

At first sight, the Sophoclean play shows an almost perverse lack of interest in the problematical nature of matricide, as the playwright pursues the question: what would happen if Electra heard the false news of her brother's death before learning the truth about him? The instrumental motifs of disguise and recognition catch the dramatist's attention, and matricide is relegated to the status of a traditional and uncomplicated donnée.

This switch of priorities gives its distinctive shape to the Sophoclean drama, which unfolds as the fluctuating sequence of Electra's hope and despair. When her sister, Chrysothemis, tells her about the mother's ominous dreams, Electra is elated and gathers confidence for the ensuing confrontation with Clytaemnestra in which she savagely demolishes her mother's claim to have killed Agamemnon out of just revenge. She triumphs, and a humiliated Clytaemnestra performs her rites and prayers culminating in an unspoken wish. As if in response to that silent prayer, the messenger arrives with the news of Orestes' death. Through his psychologically intricate management of the triangular dialogue situation, Sophocles reinforces the effect of Electra's disillusionment. The messenger addresses Clytaemnestra, but the dramatist wants the audience to attend to Electra's response. Three times Electra seeks to establish herself as the proper audience; three times Clytaemnestra tells the messenger to ignore her. His elaborate account of Orestes' death—much the longest messenger report in Greek tragedy—has, from the poet's perspective, its proper listener in the forgotten Electra, the neglected mourner among an official audience who take little trouble to conceal their satisfaction.

With an almost sadistic pleasure in his dramaturgical skill, Sophocles adds three twists to the isolation of Electra. First, Chrysothemis returns from the father's grave with the news of the signs of Orestes' return that she found there. She is right but Electra now "knows better," and the signs only deepen her despair. Second, Electra fails to persuade her sister to become an accomplice in carrying out Orestes' task: when Chrysothemis leaves, Electra has lost her sister as well as her brother. Third, in the play's most famous scene—an occasion for virtuoso display by Hellenistic actors—the disguised Orestes carries the urn with his own ashes to the palace, evidence of the truth of his story. He encounters Electra, and once agains she becomes the recipient of a message not intended for her. Slowly Orestes recognizes the identity of this half-crazed

woman, and the grief he has unwittingly inflicted on his sister begins to dawn on him. She asks to hold the urn, but when he sees the passionate devotion with which she clings to him in this residual form, he cannot continue in his course of deception. He takes the urn away from her in a moment that is for her the ultimate and most gratuitous form of deprivation. Out of this moment the recognition arises, and the play moves swiftly toward its conclusion.

From this description of the play, it may appear as if the drama of recognition had emancipated itself from the drama of matricide. But a moment late in the play reestablishes the connection. Electra, standing guard at the door to the palace, hears her mother's death scream and exclaims: "Strike again if you have the strength." The line is famous and problematical. Seventeenth-century critics found it difficult to reconcile this unrestrained outburst of fierce hatred with their notions of appropriate behavior for a princess. Corneille in his second *Discours* blamed Electra for "l'inhumanité dont elle encourage son frère à ce parricide" and considered it incompatible with her character as a "vertueuse opprimée"; and Racine wrote in the margins of his copy of Sophocles: "Ce vers est un peu cruel pour une fille; mais c'est une fille depuis longtemps enragée contre sa mère." Adapters of the play devised ingenious solutions, such as transferring the sentence to Clytaemnestra, in whose mouth it expresses the defiance of the hardened criminal even at the point of death.

The scandalized neoclassical critic is usually a good guide to interpretative cruxes, even though his own solutions may fail to persuade. The discrepancy between Electra's unquestioned nobility and the ferocity of her "[s]trike again" is a cardinal fact about the Sophoclean play. Its plot makes visible the psychological cost of the protagonist's dedication. Through the drama of recognition, the warped ruins of Electra's noble self become starkly apparent. At the same time, it becomes evident that Sophocles' drama has been all along the tragedy of a protagonist shaped and distorted by the burden of revenge on the mother.

Aeschylus's Electra is forgotten after the recognition; the Euripidean character becomes an accessory to the matricide. The Sophoclean Electra is posted outside the palace and becomes a vicarious participant by witnessing the event in her imagination. In the context of available dramaturgical options, this Sophoclean decision is significant: the deed that Electra need not do because of Orestes' timely arrival is also a deed that she cannot do. It is part of her fate to be incapacitated for action.

A look at Sophocles'earlier *Antigone* illustrates the point. *Antigone* is, like *Electra,* a play in which the heroine fulfills her destiny in unswerving devotion to a kinsman. In both plays, the heroine's inflexible resolve is underscored through contrast with her sister's pragmatic accommodation. But here the resemblances stop. Antigone does her deed and dies for it, but she suffers no diminution or distortion in her being. Within the narrow limits Greek tragedy establishes as the appropriate sphere of action for a woman, we are meant to think of her as going beyond a woman's courage; but her act, far from unwomanly, is the very paradigm of sisterly devotion. And her suffering and isolation, however intense, are short in duration: she becomes Antigone and fulfills her fate in the short space between her brother's death and her own suicide. Hence, the peculiar

bloom or freshness of her tragedy to which Hegel responded so strongly. By contrast a savage deficiency marks Electra at the moment of her "[s]trike again." She does not do the deed that she had long anticipated, but time has corroded and stunted her.

Although Hofmannsthal follows the skeletal action of the Sophoclean play, he has very little interest in the drama of recognition, which he manages in a much simpler fashion by introducing motifs from *The Odyssey* and the Euripidean version. But he is keenly interested in the theme of the protagonist's incapacitation for action to which the drama of recognition leads in the Sophoclean version. His heroine utters the obligatory "[s]trike again," but that moment is upstaged by an innovation in which the theme of her radical ability to act finds much more explicit expression. When after the recognition scene Orestes declares his intention to act speedily, she celebrates action as the "bed of rest for the soul" and contrasts the impotent and corrosive emotions of love and hatred with the fulfillment of those who act: . . .

only he is blessed
who is coming to do his deed! And blessed
who may touch him and who digs up the ax
for him out of the earth and who holds the torch
for him and who opens the door for him, blessed
is he who may listen at the door.

But when Orestes is summoned by his mentor to enter the palace, she forgets to give him the ax that she had preserved for him during her waiting, and she is overwhelmed by despair at the fact: . . .

ELECTRA *alone, in terrible suspense. She runs to*
*and fro in a single straight line in front of the door,*
*with lowered head, like a captive animal in its cage.*
*Suddenly she stands still and says*
I could not give him the ax!
They have gone, and I could not
give him the ax. There are no gods
in heaven!

This emphatic moment of failure climaxes the play's pervasive concern with distorted relationships between self and action. In one of his diary entries, Hofmannsthal lists action, work, and the child as instruments of social integration; speaks of "transformation" and "self-abandonment" in action and then alludes to his "ironic" treatment of the relationship of self and action in *Electra*. The three women in the play are differently crippled in their capacities for action as the result of Agamemnon's murder. In the case of Chrysothemis, the maternal sense of time as growth and fulfillment has given way to barren waste, and she watches with fascinated horror the useless passage of her own life: . . .

For it is not water which is rushing by,
and it is not yarn which is rolling off,
rolling off the spool; it is I, I!

For Clytaemnestra, the finality of the crime has destroyed any relationship between self and action: . . .

And *we,* we ourselves! And our deeds!
Deeds! We and deeds! What odd words!
For am I still the same who has done the deed?
And if so! Done! Done! Done!

She is not hypocritical when she remembers nothing about the deed itself: . . .

Now it was before, and then it was
past—in between
I did nothing.

But she is terrified by the consequences of what she can no longer remember:. . .

Is it then possible
to perish, alive, like a rotting carcass?
Can one waste away and not be sick?
Go to wrack, with waking senses, like a robe
eaten up by moths?

In some respects, an even more powerful account of her dissolving self appears in the stage direction that describes the arrival of Clytaemnestra and her train: . . .

*A hurried procession passes the glaringly lit-up windows, clanking and shuffling by: it is a tugging and dragging of animals, a muted scolding, a quickly stifled scream, the whistling sound of a whip, a recovering and staggering onward.*

In her despair, she tries to establish herself through rituals: there is a right way of doing everything, and if everything is done rightly, the chaos at the center is overcome: . . .

There are
rites. There must be proper rites for everything.
How one pronounces a word, and a sentence,
much depends on that. Also on the hour.
And whether one is full, or fasting.

Compulsive repetition also governs the life of Electra. The worship of her father has

become a ritual for her: in the very opening lines of the play, the time is given as "her hour, her time of day when she howls for her father." She is fiercely absorbed by the memory of the past and her imaginary anticipation of revenge, thoughts which occupy a much greater proportion of the play than they do in the Sophoclean version. But if Hofmannsthal designs for Electra a special participation in the deed, the guardianship of the ax, he introduces the motif only to mark her failure: in the end she does not give her brother the ax that he does not, in any event, need.

Hofmannsthal's disabled Electra is an interpretation of the Sophoclean character in light of Hamlet and Iphigenia. The Hamletesque dimensions of Electra's failure to give Orestes her ax are obvious. But there is also a systematic opposition to Iphigenia. In her decisive soliloquy, Goethe's heroine asks: "Hat denn zur unerhörten Tat der Mann allein das Recht?" [Do men alone, then, have the right to do unheard-of feats?]; and through her decision to tell the truth, she commits an act that defines her and integrates the society around her. Iphigenia acts and, no less than Antigone, does so in a manner peculiarly appropriate to her sense of self as a woman. Electra's compulsive and futile activity of digging up the ax marks the distance from the achieved act celebrated at the crisis of Goethe's play.

The heroine's death is certainly in keeping with Hofmannsthal's portrayal of Electra's incapacitated self. What appears as a major departure from the traditional plot also renders explicit the problematical state of the heroine that is implicit in the Sophoclean version. One may well argue that Electra's death is the most "Sophoclean" feature of Hofmannsthal's version, and that it radicalized tendencies in the ancient version that its author was prevented from pursuing by the conventions of his craft. It was beyond the freedom of the ancient playwright to change outcomes dictated by tradition, and in the tradition Electra survived. But playwrights sometimes elaborated their plots in such a manner as to render the traditional outcome questionable or meaningless. The *deus ex machina* was the favorite device for turning a modernized plot to its preestablished ending. In a number of Euripidean plays, the discrepancy between plot and outcome becomes a source of ironic effect. What the *deus ex machina* establishes is so obviously not a solution that the audiences are invited to envisage conclusions that follow more logically from the course of events.

A *deus ex machina* of this kind appears in *Philoctetes,* a play that has many affinities with the Sophoclean *Electra.* In both plays, time and hatred have violently twisted the noble but inflexible constitutions of the protagonists so violently that one may ask whether these figures are no longer or all too much themselves? Can one imagine a return to normal life for either of them? In the *Philoctetes,* the obstinate and self-absorbed protagonist refuses to travel the path that will bring victory to the Greeks and glory to himself because he cannot do so without benefiting his enemies. The satisfaction of his hatred has come to dominate everything else, and only the appearance of Heracles, once the hero's mentor and now a paradigm of suffering and transfiguration, frees the hero from both physical and mental anguish. It takes a leap of faith to follow this ending. The *Electra* simply ends without saying anything whatever about the future of the heroine. To kill the heroine, as Hofmannsthal does, is to take the plot of the Sophoclean play to its radical conclusion and develop it in the other direction

from that of the *Philoctetes.* Twentieth-century German scholars have promptly and with some justice read Hofmannsthal's ending into Sophocles' play Thus, Schadewaldt calls Electra's "[s]trike again" "virtually her own death cry."

In the Ariadne letter, one of his most important interpretative statements about *Electra*, Hofmannsthal draws out the thematic implications of Electra's death. He dwells on the paradox that one cannot live without changing and forgetting, but that all human dignity is inextricably linked to memory and loyalty. Electra is for him the paradigm of a figure identified, petrified, and destroyed by loyalty; and he compares the opposition of Electra and Chrysothemis with its gentler reenactment in the figures of Ariadne and Zerbinetta. The paradoxical nature of loyalty forms an important link between Hofmannsthal's and Sophocles' versions of the Electra myth. Dignity and nobility are defining features of the Sophoclean protagonist, as they are not of the Aeschylean and Euripidean Electra figures. Nobility is not the first thing that comes to mind in Hofmannsthal's lurid portrayal of his heroine, whom he likes to show in the postures of a caged and wild animal. But in an important moment in the play's opening scene, one of the maids defies the malicious gossip of the others and expresses her enthusiastic admiration for Electra: . . .

There is nothing in the world that is nobler
than she. She lies in rags stretched out
on the threshold, but there is no one,
*Shouting*
there is no one in this house who can endure her look!

The Sophoclean Electra sacrifices her life by transforming it into a stylized memorial for her murdered father. In her ignoble environment, such a memorial can only take the external form of humiliation—just as in *Philoctetes,* true nobility hides in the protagonist's rags and cave rather than in the public world of the Trojan War. But Electra is not Cordelia, and the playwright dwells on the savage and self-enclosed aspect of nobility under such conditions. Hofmannsthal pushes this theme further. The death of his Electra resolves the final state of the protagonist in the opposite direction of the *Philoctetes.* The transfigured Heracles calls Philoctetes back to health, fame, and an active life. Electra's death spells out the consequences of such a protagonist's life in a world without miracles. As Hofmannsthal puts it in a late diary entry, she is destroyed by the content of her life, like a jar by the water that turns to ice inside it: "Electra is no longer Electra, because she dedicated herself to being only and nothing but Electra".

But ambiguities remain. Does Electra's death confirm or transcend the destructive petrification of her all too loyal self? The text need not give a definitive answer to such a question. In fact, it does not, and Hofmannsthal's own remarks about the play are also ambivalent. In the text of the play—as opposed to the libretto of the opera—Electra remains an outsider at the moment of triumph just as she had been at the moment of retribution. The parallels are precise. Electra fails to give Orestes the ax and is absent from the place of execution. After the death of Aegisthus, the inside of the house turns into a place of orgiastic celebration. Electra, however, remains outside. When Chrysothemis asks her whether she does not hear the music, Electra answers that she

hears it because the music and entire festival emanate from inside her. But an ocean weighs on her limbs so that she cannot move. Implored again by Chrysothemis, she remains standing: . . .

*stops, looks at her fixedly*
Be silent and dance. All must
approach! Here join behind me! I bear the burden
of happiness, and I dance before you.
For him who is happy as we, it behooves him to do
only this: to be silent and dance!
*She takes a few more steps of the tensest triumph and collapses.*

Her words speak of happiness and dance, but the stage directions about her gesture and movements confirm self-enclosure and petrification. Moreover, her final moments are far from the triumphal dance she had envisaged in her opening soliloquy.

In the diary entry about the genesis of the play, Hofmannsthal compares the death of Electra to that of a drone. The comparison balances waste and destruction against fertilization, and it supports a positive reading of Electra's death as a moment of fulfillment. On the other hand, in a letter written shortly after the première, Hofmannsthal distances himself from the play's "intolerable" claustrophobia and looks forward to release in a projected but never written play about "Orestes in Delphi." The ending of the opera partly resolves the ambiguities of the play in the direction of transfiguration or at least consolation. The change is largely governed by the conventions of the genre. The dramatic soprano cannot "[b]e silent and dance." In the additional words that Hofmannsthal provided for the composer, the operatic Electra becomes a cousin of Isolde and Brünnhilde, and sings: . . .

Whoever looks at me
must receive death or expire in love.
Ai! Love kills, but nobody lives
without knowing love.

In the Ariadne letter, Hofmannsthal's interpretation of his earlier work is shaped by his turn to comedy and the theme of transformation. Thus, Ariadne is an Electra who only appears to die, and in retrospect Electra becomes her forerunner:

The immeasurable depths of one's own nature, our
ties to something unnamable and eternal, so near us in
our childhood or before our birth, can close up from
the inside into a permanent painful rigor: shortly
before death, we sense that they may open again;
something of this kind, barely sayable, announces
itself in the minutes that precede the death of Electra.

Whether this is the Electra of the play or of the opera remains unanswered.

**Source:** Martin Mueller, "Hofmannsthal's *Electra* and Its Dramatic Models," in *Modern Drama,* Vol. XXIX, No. 1, March 1986, pp. 71-91.

# Critical Essay #4

*In the following essay, Corrigan examines Hofmannsthal's ideas on characterization, specifically how he shapes his characters toward defining moments.*

As an Artist Hugo Von Hofmannsthal was always violent in his reaction against materialism in philosophy and naturalism in art. Even as a young man, living in the morally debilitated pre-World War I city of Vienna, Hofmannsthal saw the limitations of an art which was committed to an external view of reality. Naturalism in the drama, with its convention of environmental credibility, from the time of Hebbel, Becque, Hauptmann, and Ibsen (up to *The Wild Duck*) had tended to show life as it existed on the surface; it was all too often sociological in its orientation and failed to capture the multiple complexities of man's inner life. It was because of this very ordinariness, this exaction of truth to life, that Hofmannsthal turned to Symbolism, the shrine of all the disenchanted young poets and dramatists of his time.

The symbolists' ideal at that time was a poetry of "Stimmung." Their poetry was often exotic and usually esoteric, but so long as it was inward and cultured, and avoided contamination with the rawness and crudities of the external social milieu of the time, it served the symbolists' purposes. Their aim was to recapture that musical intensity which is present to some degree in all art, but which was completely lost in the arid and sterile atmosphere of the sociological plays and novels. Walter Pater was the leading critic and spokesman of this movement in its rebellion against naturalism. His dictum about all the arts "aspiring towards the conditions of music" sprang from his sensitive diagnosis of the condition of art at that time, and it became the credo of many artists. Hofmannsthal was one of them. Like Strindberg, he was moved by the music of Debussy and influenced by the paintings of Gauguin and Van Gogh. In a similar way the symbolist poets, particularly Mallarmé, Valery, and Stefan George influenced the young Viennese playwright. Hofmannsthal came to believe, under these influences, that human experience is so complex that words can never express and explain it; that life can only be approached obliquely by the indirect method of symbols. As a result, Hofmannsthal rejected most of Ibsen's drama as too exact and precise for symbols and sought in his own plays to achieve the lyrical suggestiveness of music.

Hofmannsthal's early lyric dramas fit very well into this atmosphere of "Stimmung." But all too often critics have mistakenly held that symbolism is the predominant characteristic of his drama and that his plays, therefore, are more lyrical than dramatic. This is a mistake, for Hofmannsthal thought of the theater primarily in dramatic and not symbolical terms. By the turn of the century he had realized that although symbols could be used to heighten and deepen the implications of naturalistic drama, they also led to an ambiguity, an abstractness, and an allusiveness which the theater could not control and express. In this connection one is reminded of Hedwig's word to her mother at the end of the second act of *The Wild Duck:*

GINA: Wasn't that queer talk about wanting
to be a dog?

HEDWIG: Do you know, mother, I believe he [Gregers] meant something quite different by that.
GINA: Why, what should he mean?
HEDWIG: Oh, I don't know; but it seemed to me he meant something different from what he said—all the time.

If what Hedwig says is true, if everything that is explicit really means something else, then the drama either loses touch with reality or it becomes so diffuse that it can communicate only in a private and personal way rather than in the communal way that the theater requires.

It is for this reason, despite his lyrical tendencies and the fact that he was strongly influenced by the symbolist ideals of verse, that Hofmannsthal ultimately broke with many writers of his generation who included a social art like the theater in the world they rejected. After *Death and the Fool* (1893), in which he repudiates the aestheticism of the symbolists, Hofmannsthal's work is a continuing effort to achieve a theatrical form which would combine the symbolists' rich and colorful language with an action that was dramatically rather than lyrically conceived.

In his quest for a new dramatic form Hofmannsthal was never attracted to naturalism. In fact, in his *Book of Friends*, a collection of aphorisms from his notebooks, he defined the weakness of naturalistic writers with great clarity. "Naturalism distorts Nature because by copying the surface it has to neglect the wealth of inner relatedness—Nature's real mysterium." Hofmannsthal more fully describes his attitude toward objective reality as it affects the theater in a brief essay entitled *"The Theater as Illusion."* The principal thought expounded in this essay is not that the external world is "unreal" in any Platonic sense, but that it is, while real enough, too insipid, too uninspiring, too barren to be portrayed on the stage.

This attitude toward the theater had already been strongly advanced by Strindberg. The Swedish dramatist, in advocating "sensational naturalism," believed the playwright should dramatize those moments of greatest crisis and tumult in people's lives in order to see how such people really acted. In his Preface to *Miss Julie,* Strindberg writes: "Misunderstood naturalism believed that art consists in reproducing a piece of nature in a natural way. But, the greater naturalism seeks out the points where great battles take place." By using only the moments of "crisis" in the lives of his characters as his dramatic material, Strindberg's naturalistic plays were filled with sensational episodes. But this is a sensationalism of convention. Certainly, Strindberg and Hofmannsthal would be the first to admit that all the events which take place in *The Father* or *Electra* could never occur in the twenty-four hour period covered in each play. It is by packing in these events that the playwright is able to show that "inner relatedness" which is "Nature's real mysterium." Both Strindberg and Hofmannsthal were merely concerned with those mysterious forces which drive people, even to destruction, than they were with the events that these people experienced. The result is a drama of great concentration and apparent horror. But how else can the horror of dislocated people be

shown? There may be other ways, certainly Chekhov used different but equally effective techniques, but none has had a greater effect on the modern theater than the technique of Strindberg and Hofmannsthal. Their influence is due to the fact that they expressed a reality which could not be denied.

With this concept of theater in general, Hofmannsthal, of necessity, manifests very definite views concerning the function of character in his drama. An understanding of this conception of character will help to untangle the complicated and tortured people of his first mature and probably finest play, *Electra*. In an essay written in the form of a conversation, entitled *"On Characters in Novels and Plays"* (1902), Hofmannsthal discussed the kind of characters he believed belonged in the drama. Since this essay was written shortly before he began the writing of *Electra* it provides many valuable insights to how we should understand the complex characters in that play. Some excerpts:

B. Characters in the theater are nothing but contrapuntal necessities. The stage character is a contraction of the real one . . . I don't see people, I see destinies. The power of the erotic for him who is the slave of love. The power of weakness for the weak. The power of glory for the ambitious. No, not just love, just weakness, just glory; but the love by which man is enslaved, his individual weakness, his specific glory.
H. What! You want to set such narrow, such sad limits to your genius? The atmosphere of existences consuming themselves pathologically, the hideous, blind, devouring mania—are these the sinister and constricted subjects you want to choose instead of plunging into the colorful variety of human life.
B. I don't know what you call "pathological"; but I know that every human existence worthy of presentation consumes itself, and that to maintain this flame it absorbs out of the whole world nothing but the elements expedient to its burning. Yes, the world which I've fetched forth from my brain is peopled with madmen. . . My creatures are obsessed by their fixed ideas, are incapable of seeing anything in the world which they themselves do not project into it with their feverish eyes. But they are so, because they are human. For them experiences do not exist, because there is no such thing as experience; because the inner core of man is a fire consuming itself.

From this passage it is clear that Hofmannsthal conceived of character in drama as a complex of conflicting and contrapuntal foils which will reveal, in the midst of life's greatest catastrophe, what its destiny, over and above the actions of the here and now,

really is. Since Hofmannsthal was concerned with showing those passionate powers which are the greatest realities in human beings, he had to conceive a dramatic context in which his characters and their actions could collide in such a way as to reflect or express that power which motivates both the character and the action.

Thus, the function of the theater, Hofmannsthal believed, is to show that sublime and true moment in a man's life when the motivating passion-power of his existence is expressed. To Hofmannsthal this moment is more real than any external reality. To many critics, including the imaginary critic in Hofmannsthal's "Conversation," this necessitates creating characters who appear to be pathological cases. The playwright agrees; for he knows that in life, although the process may be slower and less apparent, man is ultimately destroyed by that very passion which gives him the power to live. It is that moment when man's motivating passion-power drives him to the conflict of life and death that must be captured in the drama.

When viewed in this way we see that Hofmannsthal's Electra is more than a depraved and wild beast. In the conflict of what she says and what she does, the playwright is able to present that which is most real in Electra: her Destiny. He dramatizes that consuming and passionate power of vengeance which destroys every attribute of Electra's womanhood, and, as the play ends, kills not only Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, but herself as well. We may complain that she is a mad woman, but she is real; and if, Hofmannsthal seems to say, we could each know our own reality, we too would be thought of as mad. Hofmannsthal's plays may be filled with demons, but they are demons who reveal, at the moment they are consumed, man's destiny.

It is this sensational quality inherent in Hofmannsthal's conception of character together with the impact made on him by modern painting, especially the works of Van Gogh, which accounts for the stark theatricality of his work. Upon reading *Electra*, one discovers that Hofmannsthal has endowed each element of the dramatic production with rich and contrasting colors. Hofmannsthal helps us here, for not only has he given explicit stage directions, but he also published a fuller account of his ideas concerning the play's production in a short essay published at the printing of the play. In the beginning of this essay entitled *"Szenische Verschriften Elektra,"* we find the following injunction:

> Shun any suggestion of Hellenic architecture! This avoidance of classic Greek symmetry in theater design is then carried over and consistently applied to all the other stage properties, props, costumes, even affecting the attitude and behavior of the characters themselves. In place of the Attic peninsula, the stage represents an Oriental potentate's back courtyard, where are located the hovels that house the slaves. One senses that within the enclosure an atmosphere of bleak despair prevails. It is like a cage with no possibility of flight.

Hofmannsthal is equally exact in his expressionistic description of the lighting. It is planned in such a way as to contrast the two predominant tones of the play: the black of the House of Atreus and the red of the blood which has flowed in the past and will flow again. Electra "comes out of the house. She is alone with the red flickerings of light which fall through the branches of the fig trees and drop like blood stains on the ground and on the dark walls." The color of the light is used to symbolize the density of the play's central character. It is like a Wagnerian motif; large patches of crimson are immediately associated with Electra; they grow more intense and actually glow when she makes her initial entrance and begins her monologue.

As the sun disappears from the horizon, Electra and her sister are in the shades of dusk. The pall-like quality of their existence is thus expressed and it becomes increasingly more painful as torch-lights within the palace shine out through the barred windows, casting flickering striped shadows across the girls' prison.

As Clytemnestra enters, in a procession of a thousand lights, we are not only aware of Clytemnestra's great need of light, but we are even more conscious of the great darkness that surrounds Electra. Clytemnestra, the queen with phantasmagoric nightmares, cannot stand the dark and, as Electra gradually forces her into a living nightmare the lights disappear until "only a faint light falls from inside the house across the inner court, and casts bars of shadow over the figures of the two women." This is the only link to Clytemnestra's protective yet destructive palace.

The powerful *agon* between Clytemnestra and Electra is played in the eerie shadows of this light. Just as Clytemnestra is about to go insane and that light is flickering out, she is saved and her first reaction is to call for "Lights!" Then:

> Serving women with torches come out and station themselves behind Clytemnestra. She beckons more lights! More come out and station themselves behind her, so that the court is full of light, and a red-gold glare floods the walls. Now the features of Clytemnestra slowly change, and their shuddering tension relaxes in an evil triumph. She lets the message be whispered to her again, without taking her eyes off Electra. Then the Waiting Woman lifts her staff, and, leaning on both, hurriedly, eagerly, catching up her robe from the step, she runs into the house. The servant women with lights follow her, as if pursued.

Electra is left in a "Cimmerian gloom," a portentous darkness.

Electra remains in this gloom until the revenge is completed. When all the women run out into the court with their bright torches, Electra begins her dance of death in this light of flickering red and gold. The lights symbolize net only the triumph of Electra's

vengeance, but in their burning heat they are expressive of that consuming fire within Electra which destroys her at the moment of victory.

Hofmannsthal describes the costumes with the same care. Electra and the slave women are miserably clad in the threadbare rags of the most menial slave. Clytemnestra wears a scarlet dress. Here is not the Queen of Argos, but a barbaric ruler from some oriental past. She is "bedecked all over with precious stones and talismans. Her arms are covered by bracelets, her fingers glitter with rings." She leans on an ivory staff encrusted with precious stones. Her two ladies-in-waiting are no less striking in this procession of exotic grandeur. The one is dressed in dark violet; and the other, like a snake of the Nile, is clad in yellow, her hair pulled back in Egyptian style. As Hofmannsthal tells us: "These three women must be taken as a unit, a brilliant antithesis to the impoverished-appearing Princess."

The playwright has conceived of the play in theatrical terms. Coming as he did at the beginning of the Twentieth Century Hofmannsthal was faced with the problem of how to express and communicate his feelings about human destiny in a fragmented theater. His answer was two-fold: to return to Greek mythology in an attempt to find a universal situation (a method so often used in contemporary French drama); and to seek a theatrical unity by blending all of the elements of stage production into his dramatic conception. It is here that we see Van Gogh's profound effect upon Hofmannsthal; not only visually, but structurally as well. We see in the *Electra* the intensity and contrast (the use of bright colors, particularly red and yellow, sharply contrasted with black) which characterizes Van Gogh's painting. Hofmannsthal intends his play to be lighted and costumed in a very definite way and without these effects his play will suffer greatly.

To some literary purists this is the failure of the play; for it does not stand on its own feet. Hofmannsthal would admit that his drama needs the stage directions, but he would insist that only a total theatrical production can bring that unity of expression which, as Wagner advocated before him, the dramatist needs if he is to communicate in any meaningful way to his audience.

In short, Hofmannsthal's theatrical sense is an essential element of his drama; he has made everything count: color, lighting, props, costuming. The very physical appearance of the characters is so deeply symbolic that every feature, each trait, the slightest gesture has its meaning, its relationship to all the other traits, features, and gestures. Nothing is wasted here; everything is utilized with the utmost economy, to heighten an effect here or diminish a detail there. Deliberately departing from the spirit of classical antiquity, the poet has in his profound attention to detail created so perfect and flawless a stage effect to harmonize with the characters and the plot that a definite harmony and unity almost in the Hellenic sense are the result.

A fuller understanding of how all of these elements of Hofmannsthal's dramaturgy are fused can best be demonstrated by a more detailed analysis of the play. The opening scene of the play is one of indirect exposition. The setting is the courtyard of the palace, but it is suggestive of a cage for wild animals. From the slave-women we discover that this is the dwelling place of Electra and that her behavior is much like that of a wild cat.

She "howls" nightly for her father and when we see her for the first time her actions are those of an animal. From the very beginning Hofmannsthal's heroine is presented as a pathological case. Electra is left alone; but her loneliness is of a different kind than that found in Greek dramatizations of the myth. In her passion for a bloody revenge she is beyond the pale of human relationships. A wild animal cannot exist with people in society. Unlike Sophocles' Electra, who is alone because she stands for a course of action which demands more than anyone else is capable of giving; unlike a Euripidean heroine, who is alone because she is not accepted, Hofmannsthal's Electra is alone because her driving destiny for vengeance has destroyed all her humanity and the society which surrounds her cannot tolerate her.

Her monologue is a primitive ritual. This ceremonial invocation of her father occurs daily. We are reminded of those primitive savages who attempt to control reality by ritualistic means. She goes into her trance and the ghost of Agamemnon returns. The significance of the first part of the monologue is two-fold. Not only does Electra believe that she can control reality ritualistically, but as she calls for the bloody death of all those associated with the murderers in addition to Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, we become aware that vengeance has taken such a hold on Electra that it is more real than she. It is not the revenge of a murdered father, but an all-consuming vengeance which includes everyone. The whole household is to be sacrificed so Agamemnon may resume his regal role in the other world.

The ceremony is about to end, and like the close of all primitive rites, the clairvoyant Electra breaks into a dance of death. She sees herself, Chrysothemis, and Orestes joyfully dancing in the bloody haze that exudes from the many corpses. Their horrible victory dance ironically prefigures her own dance of death.

Her sister enters calling for her. Chrysothemis' reaction is one of fear; Electra has become a wild animal even to her own family. Hofmannsthal's intention is greatly different than that of his Greek predecessors. Chrysothemis is not the weak-kneed sister; she sees that Electra has destroyed herself and would destroy all others about her because of something which has only dubious value. We learn in this scene that Hofmannsthal is not primarily interested in justice; he is showing what happens to people whose destiny is revenge. Agamemnon's death and the need for revenge of that death has long since been forgotten except as the excuse which feeds Electra's revengeful spirit.

Chrysothemis has discovered the plot to imprison Electra and has come to warn her sister. In Electra's reply we learn why Hofmannsthal has introduced the warning. It is not to heighten our sympathy for Electra, nor is it to prompt Electra to action. In her rejection of Chrysothemis, she states her own position:

Do not prowl about.
Sit on the ground, like me, and wish for death.
And judgment upon her and upon him.

These lines are remarkable for they could only be spoken by someone in the witch-doctor era of humanity's evolution. The dramatist has shown here an amazing familiarity with primitive thought and practice, for what most characterizes the savage mind is its unshakeable conviction that it can impose changes and modify phenomena in the concrete world through the exercise of will and the practice of magic ritual (mimicry). That this is what Hofmannsthal intended is made incontrovertible when Electra learns that Clytemnestra has had a horrible nightmare that Orestes had come and strangled her. Electra shouts:

It is I, I,
that have sent him to her. From my breast
I sent the dream to her.

As Electra goes on, trance-like, describing the ghastly dream that she has envisioned, it is realized with the entrance of Clytemnestra. With this entrance Hofmannsthal has pulled all of the theatrical stops: the colorful procession, the torches, the slashing whips, and the muffled cries of the slaves. He has used every theatrical technique available in order to create a peak of emotional tension which will control the mother-daughter scene.

Clytemnestra's opening speech shows in another way how different Hofmannsthal's intentions are from those of his Greek predecessors. When Clytemnestra says:

What do you want? See it now, how it rears
Its swollen neck and darts its tongue at me!
See what I have let loose in my own house.
If she could only kill me with her eyes!

We see that Hofmannsthal has transferred the snake image of the Greek versions from Orestes to Electra, and as Electra writhes in the courtyard it becomes clear that the dream image has been given human embodiment. It is more evidence that Hofmannsthal was intent upon showing the animal destiny of his heroine who is consumed with the fire of revenge.

The witch-doctor quality of Electra's character is further emphasized by the mystical cure which Clymnestra seeks, and which Electra offers. The importance of this scene is once again to contrast Hofmannsthal's dramatic conception with that of his predecessors. In all of the Greek versions of the theme great pains are taken to show the similarity between Electra and her mother; that Electra, too, is capable of taking justice into her own hands and thus bring upon herself the same guilt and fear as that suffered by her mother. The purpose of this scene, the longest of the play, is also to show the similarity of the daughter to her mother; but it is a similarity of an entirely different nature. In terms of their outward actions and language the two women are different. They are alike in that they are driven to destruction by a great passion that is

their destiny. Just as Electra's humanity is destroyed by her passion for vengeance, so too has Clytemnestra, who is described as a walking corpse, been destroyed by her all-consuming guilt and fear. Hofmannsthal has realized his idea of character as destiny most clearly in this scene of paradoxically contrasting similarity.

As the scene develops, Electra's destiny is seen to be the stronger of the two. With speeches of great rhetorical lyricism, Electra literally forces her mother up against the wall and is moving in, like the wild animal she has become, for the kill, when a messenger comes out to tell of Orestes' feigned death. Clytemnestra is saved, for the moment, and in her salvation Hofmannsthal foreshadows the tragic irony of the play's conclusion. Electra's destiny will overcome that of her mother, as it has in this scene, but Electra will be deprived then as she is now, of joining in the final kill.

The next scene moves rapidly. The almost comic banter of the cook and the two servants is a much needed lessening of the tension which Hofmannsthal has created. Its purpose, however, is not totally comic, since even in their banter these servants give us another view of those conditions which have helped to mould Electra's destiny.

The following scene between Chrysothemis and Electra is the second crucial scene in the play. Electra, determined to do the murder alone now that she believes Orestes is dead, asks her sister to help her. She is refused. The purpose of the scene is not to contrast Electra heroically determined to act for what she believes is more important than living, with Chrysothemis pathetically clinging to life at all costs (as in Sophocles). Rather Hofmannsthal uses it to show the effects of destiny upon Electra as it consumes her; this is best achieved by contrasting Electra with a girl who is not a coward, but who is repulsed by an existence which has no other aim than a constant brooding for revenge.

As the destiny of revenge consumes Electra it destroys her as a woman. Her attitude toward sex is distorted by her continuing belief that her mother's relationship with Aegisthus is adulterous. As a result all normal sexuality is obscene and guilt-ridden. Yet her denial of sex as the result of this aversion has caused her to be obsessed with it. Her language is highly charged with sexual images and all that she does has a sexual referent. The effect of this sexual denial, combined with her perverted and obsessive attitude toward love, has been to create in her marked lesbian tendencies which become overt in this scene:

You! For you are strong. (Close to her.)
How strong you are! To you
Have virgin nights given strength. How lithe and slim
Your loins are. You can slip through every cranny,
Creep through the window. Let me feel your arms;
How cool and strong they are! What arms they are
I feel when thus you thrust me back with them.
Could you not stifle one with their embrace?
Could you not clasp one to your cool firm breast
With both your arms until one suffocated?

There is such strength about you everywhere.
It streams like cool close water from a rock,
It flows in a great flood with all your hair
Down your strong shoulders.

Hofmannsthal, a master in his use of primitive psychological phenomena, creates here a scene which vividly shows us how completely his heroine has been destroyed as a woman by her passion for vengeance.

Chrysothemis, as we have pointed out, cannot accept Electra's endless cries for vengeance. She is aware, as the Sophoclean counterpart is not, that the destiny of revenge has had a dehumanizing effect upon her sister and she cannot accept it for herself. Chrysothemis is motivated by more normal human instincts; she desires marriage and the pleasures and fruits of such a union. She has the capacity to care and feel for others (most clearly seen, in contrast to her sister, in her reaction to the report of Orestes' death) and must reject that destiny which withers all human feelings. But Hofmannsthal is not asking us to sympathize with Chrysothemis, attractive as she is. Hofmannsthal's intention is to show the reality of Electra's destiny and the destructive effects that it has on her humanity. The function of Chrysothemis in this scene is to put into sharper focus the dehumanizing process which is taking place in Electra's character.

Left alone Electra plans to carry out the murders by herself. Like the wild animal which we know she is, she begins to dig in the earth, like a dog for a bone, for the battle-ax which had been used to murder her father. It is while she is digging for the means to achieve, almost ritualistically, the purification of the House of Atreus, that she is discovered by her brother. The recognition scene, although similar in construction to Sophocles', has lost much of its traditional importance. Hofmannsthal stresses three elements. First, he heightens Orestes' horror at what has happened to Electra over the years while he has been absent, in order to drive home with finality the process of dehumanization which has taken place in the heroine. Second, as Electra concludes her description of the horrors of being caged in the palace for years, she says: "Speak to me, speak! Why your whole body trembles." Orestes replies:

My body? Let it tremble. Do you not think
That he would tremble otherwise than this
Could he but guess the way I mean to send him?

The significance of this speech (hardly noticed by most critics) is to state explicitly Hofmannsthal's belief that one's physical being is separate from that force which drives human action. Third, Hofmannsthal makes it clear that the gods do not demand vengeance. This radical change in the tradition underscores the fact that there is no motivation for the revenge except that Electra must have revenge. We really do not know why Orestes has come and what motivates his acceptance of the duty to wreak vengeance on the slayers of his father. There is only an intentional vagueness. Since

Hofmannsthal is concerned with showing the destiny of revenge in Electra, and not with the ethical problems which result from matricide and murder, revenge for the sake of revenge is motivation enough for the play's external action. It is only when we see the play as an expression of Hofmannsthal's concept of the reality of destiny that this apparent "motiveless malignancy" dues not cause trouble in the interpretation of the play.

From this point on the play moves quickly to its conclusion. Orestes enters the house, and while he is preparing for the murders, Electra paces back and forth "before the door with bowed head, like a wild beast in its edge." Suddenly she remembers the battle-ax. This is the final irony of her destiny. In her excitement at seeing her brother she forgot to give him the ax. Both murders are successfully accomplished without a struggle. At the moment of Aegisthus' death there begins a gigantic demonstration in which the entire populace, Chrysothemis included, participates. The echoing noise from the demonstrators swells into a mighty roar and the flickering beams cast by a thousand torches accompany this crescendo. In the midst of all the commotion one person appears motionless, unable to join the throng: Electra. Then with superhuman effort she rises and plunges into a weird, unrestrained dance. But Electra is no longer of this world; her mission on earth is fulfilled, and she no longer has a will to live. She whirls on and on until exhausted, she falls into a lifeless heap. The prophetic vow to her mother has been consummated.

This final moment, one of great theatrical power, is symbolic of Hofmannsthal's conception of the character of Electra. It is the dance that earlier in the play gave Electra ritual control over her hated captors; and yet, as the play ends, *she* is controlled by the dance to the point of death. The dance is symbolic of the victory of her destiny of vengeance; and yet it is her defeat. It is fulfillment which is empty. The dance, in its orgiastic quality, is symbolic of a kind of sexual realization, but the fruit of that realization is destruction. This is the "sublime and true moment" of Electra's life; this is the moment when her destiny, that passion and power which has sustained her through all the years of hardship, destroys her. Electra is that incendiary figure whose spark ignites Orestes to action. But the fire, like the dance, her chief weapons against her enemies, could only be turned in upon herself once they have done their work and her enemies are no more. Hofmannsthal realizes his intention that the drama "must capture that moment when man is destroyed by the very passion which gives him life!"

What is the tragedy? The more obvious answer is that Electra was engaged in a struggle that proved futile; Electra sacrificed all that she was as a human being for nothing. This futility is symbolized by the fact that Orestes succeeded without the aid of the battle-axe Electra had so carefully buried for this sacred moment. Electra failed to share even symbolically in the fulfillment of her life's dream. These ironies, however, are but symbols of the greater tragedy. The tragedy of Hofmannsthal's *Electra* is that men are destroyed by the very forces which give them life.

Hofmannsthal used the Electra theme in a new way. He was not concerned with justice, with self-realization and rebirth through suffering, nor with the helplessness of the human situation. He gave this traditional theme new life, by using it to express the

tortured reality of human existence in a time when man could not live by any other means than by those passions which so moulded his life as to become its destructive destiny.

**Source:** Robert W. Corrigan, "Character as Destiny in Hofmannsthal's *Electra,*" in *Modern Drama,* Vol. 22, No. 1, May 1959, pp. 17-28.

# Topics for Further Study

Read Sophocles' *Electra* and describe some of the similarities and differences between that play and von Hofmannsthal's version. How do the two dramatists differ in their portrayals of Electra and Clytemnestra?

In your experience, what is the best way to deal with bad memories from the past? Write a paragraph or two about a situation that has troubled you deeply and how you have come to terms with it.

What is meant by the modern idea of the rule of law? How does that concept differ from the concept of retributive justice, as shown in *Electra*? A few societies today still adhere to versions

of retributive justice, in which members of the victim's family are permitted to execute the murderer. Is it fair to call this a "primitive" approach to crime and punishment and to regard our own system as superior?

In Homer's *Odyssey,* Odysseus encounters Agamemnon in the underworld and Agamemnon tells his story. Read this account, which can be found about two-thirds through Book 11, and then imagine that you are also able to journey into Hades, where you encounter not Agamemnon but Clytemnestra. What might Clytemnestra say to explain her actions and also what happened to her in the end?

# Compare and Contrast

**1900s:** In Vienna, Arnold Schoenberg develops a new approach to composing classical music. He turns away from traditional harmony and melody and develops music that no longer functions in an identifiable key. It becomes known as atonal music. The nature of his work, being revolutionary, is often misunderstood by the public.

**Today:** Schoenberg's music, along with that of his pupils Alban Berg and Anton von Webern, has long had a place in the contemporary classical repertoire. Atonal works are no longer as shocking to audiences as they were in Schoenberg's early days. The "twelve tone" method that he invented continues to influence contemporary composers.

**1900s:** Sigmund Freud publishes his seminal work, *The Interpretation of Dreams,* in which he applies the method of psychoanalysis to dreams. It becomes one of the most influential books of the century. Freud's central ideas are that dreams express the disguised wishes of the subconscious. It is in this book that he first names and describes the Oedipus complex (the son's desire to kill the father and marry the mother).

**Today:** Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* is still valued as a pioneering work that opened up an entire new field of study. Freud's thought has been modified and expanded by his followers and interpreters. However, he also has his critics. Many are skeptical that Freud did, in fact, explain the functioning of the unconscious. The argument is that he went too far in his generalizations, based on a small sample of patients and focused too much on repressed sexual desires as an explanation of the contents of the unconscious.

**1900s:** The Vienna Circle begins discussions in 1907. This is a group made up of sociologists, mathematicians, physicists, and philosophers. Their work proves central to the development of a philosophical approach known as logical positivism, which rejects traditional philosophy and metaphysics. Logical positivism is concerned with the analysis of scientific knowledge, according to the "verification principle." This principle states that a non-analytic sentence must be empirically testable if it is to possess any meaning.

**Today:** Contemporary philosophy owes much to logical positivism, as can be seen in the attention given to the analysis of scientific thought. In the United States, much of this influence is due to the fact that many logical positivists emigrated from Europe to America during the middle of the twentieth century.

# What Do I Read Next?

Von Hofmannsthal's *The Cavalier of the Rose* (1912) is the English translation of his libretto for Strauss's famous comic opera, *Der Rosenkavalier.* Unlike many opera librettos, it is also excellent literature in its own right and can be read and enjoyed quite independently of Strauss's music.

Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), a trilogy of plays made up of *Homecoming, The Hunted,* and *The Haunted,* is loosely based on Aeschylus' trilogy, the *Oresteia.* It is set at the end of the American Civil War and uses Freudian psychology to explain the motivations of the characters. Lavinia Mannon is the Electra character who, along with her brother, must avenge the death of their father, who was murdered by their mother.

Euripides' play, *Iphigenia in Aulis* (available in *Euripides IV: Four Tragedies,* 1968), takes as its subject the sacrifice of Iphigenia, the event that aroused Clytemnestra's undying hatred for her husband Agamemnon.

*The Poet and the Countess: Hugo von Hofmannsthal's Correspondence with Countess Ottonie Degenfeld,* edited by Marie Therese Miller Degenfeld (2000) contains the correspondence between von Hofmannsthal and his close friend, Ottonie Degenfeld. The letters span a period of twenty years (1909-1929) and give a fine picture of von Hofmannsthal's emotional life as well as insight into the kind of lives people led during that period. It is also clear that von Hofmannsthal was very much in love with his correspondent.

# Further Study

Bangerter, Lowell, A., *Hugo von Hofmannsthal,* Frederick Ungar, 1977.

This concise book is probably the best introduction in English to the entire range of Hofmannsthal's work in all genres.

Bennet, Benjamin, *Hugo von Hofmannsthal: The Theatres of Consciousness,* Cambridge University Press, 1988.

In this advanced study, Bennet focuses on von Hofmannsthal's poetic, philosophical and ethical concerns. It includes discussion of the role of literature in society and von Hofmannsthal's search for a response to the problem of the historical development of culture.

Bremer, Jan Maarten, "A Daughter Fatally Blocked: Von Hofmannsthal's *Elektra,*" in *Fathers and Mothers in Literature,* edited by Henk Hillenaar and Walter Schonau, Rodopi, 1994, pp. 113-21.

This brief article offers a comparison between the *Electra* of Sophocles and that of von Hofmannsthal. Bremer argues that von Hofmannsthal was more skilled in portraying the pathology of the human mind.

Michael, Nancy C., *Elektra and Her Sisters: Three Female Characters in Schnitzler, Freud, and Hofmannsthal,* Peter Lang, 2001.

Michael explores the connections between literary censorship and the political repression of women in works by Arthur Schnitzler, Sigmund Freud and Hugo von Hofmannsthal (*Electra*), all written between 1900 and 1905.

Ward, Philip Marshall, "Hofmannsthal, Elektra and the Representation of Women's Behaviour through Myth," in *German Life and Letters,* Vol. 53, No. 1, January 2000, pp. 37-55.

Ward suggests that *Electra* is von Hofmannsthal's portrait of a woman who transgresses the socially acceptable bounds of female behavior. This is shown by her negative attitude to motherhood, inappropriate sexuality, free flow of words, and practice of staring (ladylike behavior demanded a lowering of the eyes and no inappropriate eye contact).

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Marx, Robert, "Act Two," in *Opera News,* Vol. 63, No. 9, March 1999, p. 18.

McMullen, Sally, "From the Armchair to the Stage: Hofmannsthal's *Elektra* in Its Theatrical Context," in the *Modern Language Review,* Vol. 80, No. 3, July 1985, pp. 637-51.

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von Hofmannsthal, Hugo, *Selected Plays and Libretti,* edited and introduced by Michael Hamburger, Pantheon Books, 1963, p. xxxiii.

———, *Three Plays: Death and the Fool, Electra, The Tower,* translated and with an introduction by Alfred Schwarz, Wayne State University Press, 1966.

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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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