The Oresteia Study Guide

The Oresteia by Aeschylus

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

This trilogy of plays, written a number of years B.C.E., dramatizes one of the earliest, most culturally significant myths of Ancient Greek civilization—how a series of revenge/power-motivated murders in the family of King Agamemnon of Mycenae eventually leads to the establishment of democratic (as opposed to natural) justice. One of the few surviving complete examples of Classical Greek drama, the trilogy is populated by archetypal characters, whose actions explore themes relating to the nature and purpose of revenge, and the relationship between humanity and spirituality (the gods).

The Oresteia is set several years after the Trojan War, in which Agamemnon, the King of Mycenae and a general in the Greek army, fought alongside other Greek kings/generals to destroy the city of Troy. They were seeking revenge on Paris, a prince of Troy, for his having kidnapped Helen, the beautiful wife of Menelaus, another king/general. As they attempted to sail for Troy, the Greek armies found there was no wind. Agamemnon was then told by the goddess Artemis that the only way he could get a favorable wind was to sacrifice his daughter to her. Guilt ridden, Agamemnon nevertheless did as the goddess told him—and in doing so, triggered the wrath of his wife Clytemnestra, who, while he was at war, plotted revenge of her own.

The first play of the trilogy, titled Agamemnon, takes place several years after these events. Clytemnestra has been vengefully plotting Agamemnon's death the entire time he's been away and has begun an adulterous relationship with Aegisthus, a kinsman of Agamemnon's (who has his own reasons for taking revenge on the king). When Agamemnon finally returns, bringing a captured Trojan princess with him as a mistress, Clytemnestra puts her plans into action. She seduces Agamemnon into believing that he is welcome and that all at home is well, but as he's taking a bath she slaughters him with an ax. Shortly afterwards, she kills the Trojan princess. As Aegisthus attempts to take the credit for what they did, Clytemnestra urges him to speak calmly, saying now that their long-troubled kingdom can now live in peace.

The second play of the trilogy, The Libation Bearers, takes place several years after the events of the first play. Orestes returns home from exile with the intent of taking revenge for his father's murder. He encounters his embittered, grieving sister Electra, who encourages him to kill both Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Orestes puts a plot in motion, lures Aegisthus to a humiliating death and, after an intense confrontation with Clytemnestra, kills her as well. He declares the trials of his family to be at an end, but then discovers that he's being pursued by the Eumenides, ancient goddesses of natural justice who consider what he's done (a son killing his mother) to be the most heinous of all crimes. Orestes flees, and the Eumenides pursue him.

The third play of the trilogy, The Eumenides, also takes place several years later. The pursuit of Orestes has brought both him and the Eumenides to the point of desperate exhaustion. Orestes cries out to the god Apollo for guidance. The god appears and tells him to seek justice at the temple of Athena, the goddess of justice, in Athens. Orestes

travels to Athens, still pursued by the Eumenides. Athena herself appears, listens to their respective stories and creates a panel of human judges (the Aeropagus) to hear and judge the case. When the vote of the Aeropagus turns out to be a tie, Athena casts the final vote—in favor of Orestes, who is freed from the torturous pursuit of the Eumenides. He proclaims his intention to live out his days peacefully and then leaves. Athena persuades the Eumenides to accept a less vicious and hostile place in the pantheon of the gods and in the process of seeking justice and then names the Aeropagus as her earthly representatives, the embodiment of ultimate human justice in the world.

Play 1, Part 1 (p. 111-124)

Play 1, Part 1 (p. 111-124) Summary

The play begins with an ode (speech) spoken by a Watchman, who describes himself as being posted on the roof of Agamemnon's and Clytemnestra's palace in Mycenae, watching for a prearranged sign (a bonfire) that Agamemnon is on his way home from the Trojan War. As he speaks of Clytemnestra's strength of will and of a strange feeling of oppressive fear (see "Quotes", p. 112), he sees the bonfire and rejoices, calling out to Clytemnestra to wake and welcome Agamemnon joyfully.

The Chorus appears and recounts at poetic length Agamemnon's story—how he and his brother-king Menelaus attempted to sail to the city of Troy to rescue Menelaus' kidnapped wife Helen; how they were prevented by a lack of wind, and how the goddess Artemis demanded that Agamemnon sacrifice his youngest daughter in order to gain more favorable conditions. The Chorus speaks of Agamemnon's anguish in having to choose between his daughter and his brother, of how he chose his brother and killed his daughter, and of how Clytemnestra has since placed offerings at every shrine in Mycenae - and of how strange it is for her to have done so. They also speak of how Agamemnon's fate, whatever that may be, was preordained by the gods (see "Quotes", p. 113).

Clytemnestra emerges from the palace, and the Leader of the Chorus asks her if she brings news. She challenges the Leader and the other members of the chorus (described in poetic narration as a group of old men) to believe what she says even though she's a woman. When they agree, she tells them that news of Troy's defeat has come. After describing in poetic detail how the news came (via a series of signal bonfires lit on the top of a series of mountains), Clytemnestra describes what she imagines Troy to be like—ruined, burning, filled with the wails of the living mourning for the dead and captured. She warns the Chorus not to get too excited, as Agamemnon and his army still have to make the perilous journey home, adding that "the blessings of [her] home are manifold, and [she] would keep them still." After she goes back into the palace, the Leader of the Chorus offers praise to Zeus for bringing victory, commenting that the Trojans got exactly what they deserved (see "Quotes", p.121). The Chorus speaks at length of how they agree with the Leader, saying that Paris (the Trojan prince who kidnapped Helen) also got what he deserved (see "Quotes", p. 124). This section concludes with the Chorus wondering whether the good news of Agamemnon's return is actually as good as they all at first believe. They comment that "None but a woman, framed of hopes and fears/Should yield assent before the fact appears."

Play 1, Part 1 (p. 111-124) Analysis

There are several key elements to consider in this first section. The first is structural, and there are two points here worth noting. The first can be found in the play's opening

moments, in that the Watchman's speech reflects the traditional beginning of most Classical Greek drama—a character alone on stage describes the circumstances of the story about to be told. Similar descriptions occur at the beginning of the second and third plays in the trilogy, offered by Orestes and a Priestess respectively. This pattern of an introductory/expository speech setting up the action can be found, as mentioned, in most other Classical Greek theater. A second important structural component is the establishing of a second narrative pattern common to Classical Greek drama—a speech/scene involving characters in the narrative (i.e., the Watchman) followed by a lengthy, more poetically written section featuring the Chorus. This structural pattern is discussed further in the "Style-Structure" section of this analysis.

A second key element of this first section is the amount of foreshadowing it contains. The Watchman's feelings of impending doom, Clytemnestra's imaginings of the destruction of Troy and the grieving of its citizens, and the repeated comments that Paris and the other Trojans got what they deserved are all portents of what's to come - Agamemnon and Cassandra's doom/destruction at the hands of Clytemnestra, and her contention that they're only getting what they deserve. It's important to note here that this latter point (that the victims of vengeance only get what they deserve) also plays out in the other plays of the trilogy, in that Orestes feels that Clytemnestra (and Aegisthus) meet the end they deserve, and the Eumenides feel that Orestes receives the soul-tormenting persecution that hedeserves. The issue is one side of the debate at the core of the play's thematic premise - does true justice emerge when one gets what one deserves, or when one does what is right and for, as Athena puts it in The Eumenides, "the triumph of all good ..." (see "Play 3, Part 3 Summary/Analysis").

The final key element in this section is the presentation of the play's backstory, or history of events before the action of the play begins. Another term for this element is exposition, and in this case can be found in the Chorus' story of Agamemnon's sacrifice. It's important to note here that for the play's original audience, the Ancient Greeks, this story would have been common knowledge - the story is one of the myths upon which Ancient Greek culture was founded, in the same way as Judeo-Christian stories from the Bible are, in many ways, the foundational beliefs upon which contemporary Western culture is built. In short, the Chorus here functions to remind the audience of the spiritual/cultural context of the story they're about to see unfold, rather than giving them new information.

Play 1, Part 2 (p. 125-132)

Play 1, Part 2 (p. 125-132) Summary

A Herald appears, shouting how glad he is to be back in Mycenae, thanking the gods for blessing him and the rest of the army, and praying for them to continue to bless Agamemnon and the other soldiers as they return. He speaks of how Troy and Paris, in being ruined, both got what they deserved. The Chorus reminds him that there has been suffering at home as well, referring specifically to those who have been grieved by the loss of loved ones and by being separated from the warriors for so long. The Herald agrees, commenting briefly on the privations suffered by the soldiers while at war but adding that the reward (i.e., victory) was worth it.

Clytemnestra returns, chides the Chorus for not believing her (a woman) when she first said she'd heard the news of Agamemnon's victory and then tells the Herald to tell Agamemnon that she has been loyal and faithful while he's been gone, adding that she's kept his home safe and welcoming for him. "Such [a] boast," she says, "instinct with honest truthfulness / A noble wife may utter without blame." She goes back into the palace to prepare for Agamemnon's arrival. After she's gone, the Chorus asks the Herald for news of Agamemnon's brother Menelaus. The Herald describes in detail how the Mycenean fleet sailed into a violent storm, how many men were killed, and how Menelaus' ship (with him on it) disappeared. The Herald then urges the Chorus to have faith that Menelaus is still alive, saying that "Zeus wills not yet, we trust/Menelaus' race should perish." In response, the Chorus again speaks of how Troy and Paris got what they deserved, referring to how Paris broke the laws of nature by kidnapping Helen. They liken the fall of Troy to the fall of a much loved youth, who squandered the good will and love shown to him when he was a child and gave in to selfish, self-destructive instincts. "...And with dire outrage slew/The home-bred flock/So making ill return for all that care/Till all the peaceful floor/With blood was dabbled oer/.../the self provided feast/of that unbidden guest/spread havoc round him whereso'er he moved." They conclude this speech, and this section, with a reference to how Justice and Righteousness will always prevail.

Play 1, Part 2 (p. 125-132) Analysis

The foreshadowings of Part 1 continue in this section, appearing in the references to Troy being in ruins (foreshadowing the ruin in which Agamemnon's family is left by the end of this first play, and indeed by the end of the trilogy), and also in the references to the victims of "righteous war" getting what they deserved. This foreshadows Clytemnestra's "righteous war" on Agamemnon, Orestes' "righteous war" on Clytemnestra, and the Eumenides' "righteous war" on Orestes. It's perhaps possible to see the story of Menelaus' encounter with the storm as another sort of foreshadowing - in this case, of the fatal "storm" of vengeance about to break upon Agamemnon, and the

later "storm" that breaks upon Clytemnestra, Aegisthus (in Play 2) and Orestes (in Play 3).

The other key element here is the way in which Clytemnestra is already acting out her plans to take revenge on Agamemnon - specifically, the way in which she seduces first the Herald, then the Chorus, and then in the following sections Agamemnon himself, into believing that her home is safe and welcoming. It could be argued that as she presents herself as loyal, strong and loving, there are echoes of the attitude and actions of the wife of another long-voyaging general in the Trojan War - Penelope, the archetypally-faithful and devoted wife to Odysseus. The difference, of course, is that Penelope truly was faithful, while here and in the following sections Clytemnestra is lying through her teeth.

Play 1, Part 3 (p.133-140)

Play 1, Part 3 (p.133-140) Summary

Agamemnon appears, riding in a chariot and accompanied by a beautiful young woman, the Trojan princess Cassandra). The Leader of the Chorus speaks effusive words of welcome, praising Agamemnon for his just and righteous victory, won after much suffering. Agamemnon responds by saying he never would have found the strength to continue fighting without having the memory of his home to sustain them. He then thanks the Chorus for their welcome, speaks (as they did) of how Paris and Troy got what they deserved, and comments that "glorious [Troy] / Was, for a woman's sake, ground into dust ..." He then speaks of his plans for learning about the state of his kingdom, and his plans to rectify whatever's gone wrong in his absence.

Clytemnestra appears, speaking at length of how her life since Agamemnon's departure has been filled with loneliness for him, with watchfulness for true news of his health and his return, and with determination to keep his home and family safe. She explains that she sent their son Orestes into exile to keep him safe from possible assassination by Trojan spies, speaks of how glad she is to have Agamemnon home again, and urges her female attendants to lay a carpet of rich purple cloth for him to walk on as he goes into the palace. Agamemnon, in response, speaks disparagingly of Clytemnestra's welcome - he says the welcome she's planned is more suited to gods than to humble mortals. They argue briefly but with careful politeness, fully aware that they're in public. Clytemnestra says that the Trojan King defeated by Agamemnon would have welcomed such a greeting, but Agamemnon says he doesn't want to be thought of badly by his people (seeing him treated with such indulgence) and adding that women shouldn't argue with their husbands. He finally agrees to walk on the carpet but says he will do so in humble, bare feet. After telling Clytemnestra to welcome Cassandra gracefully, he walks with Clytemnestra into the palace. As he goes in, Clytemnestra prays briefly to Zeus in gratitude for fulfilling all her prayers.

The Chorus speaks at length of how they suddenly feel danger and foreboding, but don't know exactly why. The poetry of the speech develops an extended metaphor of life being like a sailing ship, which even when sailing calmly and smoothly can suddenly and unavoidably strike an unseen rock, adding that even if some of that ship's valuable cargo is lost, the ship itself will continue to function and maintain its glorious progress. The speech and the section conclude with a reference to the inevitability of death, an inevitability decreed by Zeus.

Play 1, Part 3 (p.133-140) Analysis

The first element to consider about this section is its profound sense of irony, particularly in Agamemnon's feelings of relief and gratitude at being home when he is, in reality, about to be slaughtered. The point to keep in mind here is that as mentioned, the

Ancient Greek audience would have known what was about to happen, so the irony would indeed be strongly present in their minds. The other level of irony here is, of course, the way in which Clytemnestra continues to protest and proclaim her love and devotion, while at the same time having in her mind the image of her ax cutting into her husband's flesh. This last, of course, is never stated outright but given what she does later in the play it's certainly a natural inference to draw.

A second key element here is the way in which the play's apparent attitude towards women (essentially that they should be kept in their male-dominated place) reaches its highest point of expression. This occurs in Agamemnon's patronizing comments about the cause of the Trojan War, in his treating Cassandra essentially as plunder, and about the way in which a wife should express her feelings towards her husband. The intensity with which this idea is presented here suggests the possibility that the playwright is pointing out that as a woman, Clytemnestra should meekly accept what her husband did, in sacrificing their daughter, and in bringing home an obvious mistress/concubine. This may not be, however, as misogynistic as it first appears, in that the playwright might be making the point that the desire for revenge is a fundamentally human experience transcendent of gender - Clytemnestra here feels it as strongly, and as righteously, and perhaps as justifiably, as Orestes does in The Libation Bearers. It's a tricky point to consider, given that the play's overall attitude towards women seems to be more repressive (see, again, "Themes - Womanhood"). Ultimately, however, because the play's predominant theme deals with the issue of revenge, it must be considered that this issue of revenge trumps that of gender roles and relations.

The final key element to consider here is the appearance of one of the play's key symbols, the purple carpet. As discussed in the "Symbols" section, the carpet represents the path of blood and destruction taken by three generations of Agamemnon's family.

Play 1, Part 4 (p.140150)

Play 1, Part 4 (p.140150) Summary

Clytemnestra once again comes out of the palace calling for Cassandra to come in as well. When Cassandra doesn't move, the Chorus also urges her to go in. When Cassandra still doesn't move, Clytemnestra assumes Cassandra simply doesn't understand (being from a foreign land), loses patience with her and storms back into the palace. The Chorus, however, remains, saying that they feel pity for Cassandra and urging her again to come down from Agamemnon's chariot. Cassandra then cries out for the god of Apollo, calling him the destroyer of both her home (Troy) and her life. Still crying out, she then has a vision of the palace's history (see "Characters - Atreus") and of the blood-soaked doom awaiting both her and Agamemnon. The Chorus reacts with appalled fear as she continues, foreseeing both Agamemnon's and her own death at the hands of Clytemnestra. She describes what's happening to her (see "Quotes", p.144), and explains to the Chorus that she was given the gift of prophecy by the god Apollo in hopes that she would give herself to him, but because she rejected him she was cursed to never be believed. After the Chorus comments that what she says about the past sounds true to them, Cassandra strips away the tokens of her royalty (i.e., jewelry) and experiences one more prophetic vision - that "The mother-slaying scion of his race ... shall return, and put the cope/On these home troubles." Finally, she prays for a quick and painless death and approaches the palace. For a moment she shirks, aware again of the history of blood and slaughter associated with the palace but then firmly resolves to go in and meet her fate, praying that when the moment of vengeance comes, her death, too, will be avenged.

The Chorus speaks briefly of how life, even a prosperous one, can be suddenly and completely ruined. Their meditations are interrupted by Agamemnon crying out from within the palace that he's being murdered. The Chorus realizes what's going on, and then fragments - one part arguing to fetch legal authorities, another part arguing for breaking into the palace and interrupting the murder, and another part arguing that events must be left to run their destined course. After the argument, the Leader of the Chorus announces that they will all wait to act until they're certain of what's happened to Agamemnon.

Play 1, Part 4 (p.140150) Analysis

Because she is a prophetess and can foresee the future, Cassandra is an embodiment of foreshadowing, and is utilized here to give a highly visceral sense of foreboding. Her words are simultaneously sensual and horrific, and combined with the cries of Agamemnon coming from the palace create a vivid sense of genuine, cold-blooded slaughter. On another level, Cassandra is an embodiment of one of the trilogy's key themes - the inescapable nature of destiny. Not only is she able to see and know and understand what's coming, she sees and knows and understands that she is riding a flood-tide that

cannot be turned back. She is the only character in the entire trilogy (gods excepted) who is fully aware that she is living out the fate ordained for her from the beginning of her life. The other characters have awareness only of the present moment, of their present desires and feelings. Cassandra fully lives and embodies past, present and future and, as a result, is perhaps the most fully tragic character in the entire Atreus/Agamemnon/Orestes chain of events. On a third level, Cassandra's words simply and clearly foreshadow the action to come - specifically, the return of Orestes.

The choral ode that concludes this section develops the play's theme of inexorable destiny even further. The argument between the various sections of the chorus dramatizes a fundamental question of human existence—whether to struggle against what seems to be a destined path, and whether pass judgment on the events taking place on that path, or whether to passively allow events to unfold as they will/as they are meant to. The chorus' internal struggle is, in short, an echo of an internal struggle faced by each human. It's important to note here that by the end of the trilogy, in the concluding moments of The Eumenides, the playwright seems to have come down clearly on the side of balance. He seems to be suggesting that struggle against apparent destiny (such as the struggle against his destiny undertaken by Orestes) can be both valid and rewarded, while passing and accepting judgment (such as that offered by Athena and sustained by her court of law) is sometimes necessary. He also suggests that at other times it becomes both necessary and appropriate to accept the path offered by destiny (as the Eumenides do when accepting the option offered to them by Athena). In other words, the trilogy is ultimately thematically ambivalent, but nonetheless remains profoundly pointed in its observations and commentary.

Play 1, Part 5 (p.150-159)

Play 1, Part 5 (p.150-159) Summary

Clytemnestra appears, revealing the bloody and murdered bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra. She speaks with triumphant, proud defiance (see "Quotes", p. 150) of what she's done, taunting the Chorus for thinking her "womanish" and for thinking that she did wrong when her husband (who killed his daughter) did right. As one part of the Chorus cries out in agonized grief for the country's king, another part refers to the way the family has been cursed by the actions of Atreus and suggests that Clytemnestra's actions are a continuation of that curse. Clytemnestra, however, argues that her actions have actually ended the curse.

Aegisthus (Clytemnestra's lover) appears, thanking the gods for the justice that has been done, revealing that he is the only surviving son of Thyestes (the brother of Atreus whose other children were slaughtered). He brags of how he planned Agamemnon's death, and when the Chorus reminds him that it was actually Clytemnestra who did the deed, Aegisthus says that not only was he responsible for the plan, but that Agamemnon, by his actions and those of his father, brought about his own death. When the Chorus persists in reminding him of Clytemnestra's role in the action, Aegisthus threatens them with violence. As the Chorus prepares to defend itself, Clytemnestra urges Aegisthus to calm down and urges the Chorus to remember their place, revealing her resolve to live in peace. The Chorus defiantly maintains that they and the other citizens of the city will not submit to a usurper (i.e., Aegisthus), crying out to the gods for Orestes to return, avenge his father, and assume the throne. When Aegisthus again threatens them, Clytemnestra urges him to pay no attention to "the idle yelpings of these old and feeble men," adding that the two of them (Clytemnestra and Aegisthus) will rule both the palace and the land.

Play 1, Part 5 (p.150-159) Analysis

This scene, like most of the scenes in this play, and indeed the entire trilogy, is laced with irony. On one level, the audience (of the time) knew that Clytemnestra would, in fact, be punished by her son for what she did and so knew that her protestations of wanting to live in peace were in vain. On a similar level are Clytemnestra's protestations that she's broken the curse of Atreus, when she has, in fact, perpetuated that curse - the Chorus is right, and the audience knows it. On another level, there is the character of Aegisthus, who is ironically so certain of his own strength and righteousness that he can't see that he's simply riding the near-mad coat-tails of the woman he says he's devoted to.

Clytemnestra's concluding assurances that the kingdom will now be peaceful also functions on a second level - to foreshadow the very end of the trilogy, at which point Orestes, having been set free from the possibility of revenge being taken on him for

killing his mother, also vows to live from that moment on in peace. The question at that point is, of course, whether Orestes' declarations of peace at that point are as ironic and as ultimately empty as those of his murderous mother here. Meanwhile, Orestes' return in the second play is foreshadowed by the chorus in this section's final moments.

Another important element in this final scene of the first play is Clytemnestra's taunting of the Chorus - specifically, her conviction that she's destroyed their perceptions of how a woman should act. This is a key development in one of the play's major themes, its perception/treatment of women (see "Themes - Womanhood"). A misogynist (one who dislikes women on principle) might in fact suggest that she has behaved exactly like a woman would - giving in to her feelings rather than looking at the bigger picture (i.e., submitting to her husband's will). A more feminist reader/member of an audience might claim that Clytemnestra is an embodiment of maternal justice - perhaps she takes it to an extreme, but arguably she's done what any mother whose daughter had been murdered by the man who fathered the daughter would do. In fact, the argument could reasonably be made that Clytemnestra is not only an archetype of maternal power, rage and grief: it could also be argued that she is, in fact, the most wronged individual in the trilogy (see "Questions").

Play 2, Part 1 (p. 165-171)

Play 2, Part 1 (p. 165-171) Summary

"The Libation-Bearers." The action of this play takes place several years after the action of Agamemnon. Orestes, now a grown man and accompanied by his friend Pylades, visits Agamemnon's tomb and prays to both Hermes, the god who guides dead souls to the underworld, and Zeus, the king of the gods, for success in his plans to take revenge for his father's murder. After leaving a lock of his hair in tribute to his father's memory and to his lineage, he sees a group of black-clad women approaching. He wonders aloud whether they're there to mourn for Agamemnon or whether they're there to mourn some new tragedy that's befallen his family. He also wonders aloud whether the woman leading is his sister, Electra, so Orestes withdraws with Pylades to watch what the women do and uncover the real reason for their being at Agamemnon's grave.

The Chorus appears, and is revealed as a group of female Trojans taken prisoner by Agamemnon and brought by him to Mycenae to be servants in his house. They speak an ode in which they formally and poetically bewail the extremity of their grief, describe Clytemnestra as "god-abandoned," and comment on the moral ruin of the royal house, speaking at length about how royal authority has become disregarded as a result. Finally, the Chorus comments that only a blood sacrifice will atone for the sin of blood already shed, adding that "the power of all earth's rivers, in one flood, [cannot] restore/To purity the hand once tinged with gore!"

At that moment Electra speaks, asking the Chorus for advice on how exactly she should pray and offer her libations to the gods, suggesting that she doesn't want to do as Clytemnestra ordered and offer prayers as though they come from a loving wife. The Chorus urges Electra to remember that she still has friends and allies, reminding her to remember Orestes and urging her that the only right thing to pray for is that her father's executioners be themselves executed. Electra takes courage from the Chorus' words, particularly their reminder of Orestes, pours out her libations and speaks a lengthy prayer to Hermes. She asks that her prayers be heard, that Orestes be brought home, and vengeance against Clytemnestra and Aegisthus be blessed. As the Chorus echoes her prayer, Electra discovers the lock of hair and excitedly tells the Chorus it could have only come from Orestes - she holds it up to her own hair, suggesting that the similarity to hers and to their father's is proof. As she speaks at exhilarated length about the possibility of her brother's return, she discovers footprints that Orestes and Pylades left behind. At that moment, Orestes reveals himself.

Play 2, Part 1 (p. 165-171) Analysis

The first point to note about this opening section of the second play is that it plays out in the context of a traditional ancient ritual - the pouring out of libations (liquid sacrifices in the form of wine or blessed water) in tribute to a dead soul, to the gods, or both. It was

believed that the making of such sacrifices increased both the potency of a prayer and the likelihood that it would be granted. The irony here, of course, is that Clytemnestra has sent Electra and the Trojan women to pray for support for her, when in fact the prayers are made in the hopes that the gods will aid in Clytemnestra's destruction. In other words, Clytemnestra has asked the women to pray for the improvement of her life, but, in fact, they're praying to bring about her death.

Another noteworthy element here is the lock of Orestes' hair, which, in addition to serving as a plot device in triggering Electra's recognition of her brother, the hair also functions symbolically. In the same way as the purple carpet in "Agamemnon" symbolized the bloody, murderous path walked by Agamemnon, his ancestors and his descendants, Orestes' hair, in its perceived similarity to both Electra's and Agamemnon's, represents not only the genetic link between the three generations but also the spiritual link - that is, the curse of Atreus (see "Characters - Atreus").

A minor thematic thread with echoes of the first play and foreshadowings of the third is developed in this section, as the Chorus' comments on royal power and authority. In all three plays, the various Choruses refer, albeit briefly, to how the authority, the right to power of the royal family, is undermined by their moral corruption. The playwright seems to be making the point, through the Chorus, that true power is both earned and respected if it is associated with clear, positive morality. Given that Classical Greek playwrights often included references to the culture in which they were writing in their work, it's possible that in these comments about morality and authority the playwright is making not-so-veiled observations about the corrupt nature of the government of the time.

Two final points. First, this entire section can be seen as foreshadowing of the murderous events to come, the slaying of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus by Orestes. And second, it's interesting to consider the Chorus' line about how "the power of all earth's rivers, in one flood, [cannot] restore/To purity the hand once tinged with gore!" This line sounds a great deal like a line in William Shakespeare's Macbeth, in which the deranged Lady Macbeth bemoans her hallucinatory inability to wash her hands of the blood with which they've been stained. There's an intriguing question here - did the translator deliberately shape his work to echo Shakespeare's play, written several centuries after the Greek? Or was Shakespeare familiar with the play and borrow the idea from it.

Play 2, Part 2 (p 171-183)

Play 2, Part 2 (p 171-183) Summary

At first Electra doubts that Orestes is who he says he is, but he convinces her, showing her that his robe is one that she herself made for him. Electra welcomes him back with tears of joy, adding that their murdered father and sister, not to mention Zeus himself, are also rejoicing. Orestes also cries out to Zeus, saying that if he supports them in their drive for revenge "a mighty house will rise from this low state of ruined majesty." Suddenly the Chorus speaks up, urging Orestes and Electra to speak more quietly in case they're overheard and word of their plans gets back to Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Orestes then speaks at poetic length of how he was commanded by the god Apollo to take revenge for Agamemnon's death, saying the god spoke to him through the Oracle at Delphi and told him that his own (Orestes') life would be cursed if he didn't take revenge. This convinces the Chorus that the cause of revenge is just and they add their voices to the prayers of Orestes and Electra, who draw near to Agamemnon's grave and speak a lengthy ode in praise of their father, express pained regret at his death and determination to take their revenge.

During the ode, Orestes comments that Agamemnon would have died a nobler death if he'd been killed fighting the Trojans. Meanwhile, Electra comments that she was forced to grieve for her father in secret, and the Chorus urges them both on by telling them repeatedly their cause is just. Orestes and Electra together urge the ghost of Agamemnon to guide and strengthen them, reminding "him" how humiliating his death was, how they've been badly treated in the years since, and how this is the last chance to forever remove the curse from their family.

After the prayer concludes, the eager Chorus tells Orestes to take action. Orestes, however, wonders why Clytemnestra asked for the libations to be poured in the first place, saying that whatever the reason is, it won't change his desire for revenge but repeating that he really needs to know. The Chorus tells him she had a dream in which she gave birth to a poisonous serpent that, when she took it to her breast to nurse it, bit her and drew blood. They add that she was so shaken by the dream that she woke up screaming and immediately sent the Chorus out to make their libations. Orestes immediately realizes that the serpent represented him in the dream and of his plans for revenge (the serpent biting Clytemnestra and drawing blood). He then announces his plans for Electra to go into the palace and wait, the Chorus is to say nothing, and he and Pylades to pose as traveling warriors. He adds that when they're welcomed into the palace, Aegisthus will be killed but at this point, Orestes makes no mention of Clytemnestra. After again urging Electra to remain silent, Orestes and Pylades go out, and Electra returns to the palace. The Chorus speaks a poetic ode of how inevitable the forthcoming act of justice has become (see "Quotes", p. 183)

Play 2, Part 2 (p 171-183) Analysis

This section of The Libation Bearers has three main components. The first is exposition, or explanations of how the circumstances of the play came to be. Examples of this component are Orestes' explanation of how/why he's there, and the Chorus' explanation of why they're pouring their libations. The second main component in this section is foreshadowing, specifically the violence to come. The main example of this is the Chorus' story of Clytemnestra's dream, which is an obvious foretelling of her approaching death. Another example is the ode spoken by the Chorus at the section's close, while a third foreshadowing appears in Orestes' reference to the Oracle at Delphi (see "Objects / Places), which foreshadows Orestes' seeking sanctuary at the Oracle, and citing the Oracle's prophecies in Orestes own defense, in "The Eumenides." The third component of this section is plot, specifically Orestes' plans for bringing about the deaths of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. The Eumenides is the most plot/action driven of the three plays, in spite of its lengthy choral odes, and in this section the nature and structure of that plot is outlined. It is, of course, another form of foreshadowing - the audience is not only given an outline of what's to come; on some level, the audience is also directed, perhaps subconsciously, to watch and see whether the plot is all going to unfold according to plan. It will, of course, given that the Classical Greek audience already knew the bones of the story, but here, as with many stories that follow an archetypal pattern or format, the point is not where the story goes, but how it gets there.

At this point, it's interesting to take a brief look at the character of Electra. After her exit into the palace, she disappears from the trilogy's action - she never appears again in The Libation Bearers, makes no appearance in The Eumenides, and is barely mentioned again in either play. It's tempting to consider this lack of further development in her character as a manifestation of the playwright's misogyny, but there is also the sense that her disappearance is dramatically valid. With Electra out of the way, conflict from here on in between Orestes and Clytemnestra, as well as between Orestes and the Eumenides in the third play, becomes more specifically defined. In other words, the conflict between killer Orestes, the murdered Clytemnestra and the Eumenides as avengers becomes more focused and more intent without the cheerleader, Electra. In any case, Electra is developed with more complexity in two other Classical Greek plays by Euripides and Sophocles, in which she is the title character.

Play 2, Part 3 (p. 183-190)

Play 2, Part 3 (p. 183-190) Summary

This section of the play takes place in front of the palace. Orestes and Pylades come in, crying out for Aegisthus and claiming they have important news. Clytemnestra appears and asks what they want. Orestes tells her they are wandering "strangers," that they've brought news that "Orestes is no more," and that they want to know whether "his" body is to be brought back home or whether he is to be buried where he fell. Clytemnestra cries out in grief, saying that Orestes was the family's last chance to break the curse placed upon it. The "stranger" apologizes for bringing bad news, but Clytemnestra assures him that he and his friend will be welcomed and treated with the same respect that any other traveler would be.

As Clytemnestra takes the "strangers" into the house, the Chorus appears and whispers a hopeful ode that now is the moment for revenge to take place. Orestes' old Nurse then comes out of the palace, grieving that the boy she took such great care of and loved so much is dead. She tells the curious Chorus that she's been sent to fetch Aegisthus, who Clytemnestra has summoned and who she wants to bring a squad of soldiers and take revenge for Orestes' murder. The Chorus tells the Nurse to tell Aegisthus to come on his own, hinting that all is not as it appears to be and that there might still be a possibility that Agamemnon's death can/will be avenged. After the Nurse goes out, the Chorus prays to Zeus, to Hermes and to the household gods that they help Orestes bring his plans for revenge to fruition. They also cry out to Orestes to have courage (see "Quotes", p.189).

Aegisthus appears, commenting on how yet again the family has been "new-burdened with blood-dripping death" and asking the Chorus whether what he's been told is true or just a rumor. The Chorus tells him to go inside and question "the strangers" himself. Aegisthus goes in, proclaiming how it's impossible for him to be fooled. The Chorus excitedly wonders aloud whether the moment of revenge is at hand. From inside the palace Aegisthus cries out that he is being slain, and shortly afterwards an Attendant comes out distraught, crying out for help. Clytemnestra runs out, also having heard Aegisthus cry out. She calls for an axe, saying she's "come / to the utterance (turning point) in this fight with Fate and Doom."

Play 2, Part 3 (p. 183-190) Analysis

This section is one of the most plot-filled in the entire trilogy in that it contains the most action. Throughout most of the trilogy (including this play) there's a lot of talking, a lot of poetry, a lot of speaking at length, but not a lot is actually done. Here, a great deal happens in a short space of time. There is a strong sense of momentum, of escalating dramatic tension, and above all of accelerated inevitability. It's interesting to compare the buildup to the murder in this play to the buildup to the murders in Agamemnon.

There the pace is almost leisurely, almost seductive; the audience is, in effect, put in the emotional/spiritual situation of Agamemnon, lured into violence rather than being eagerly hurried into it as is the case here. It seems that in this play and in the context of this murder, the playwright is deliberately taking the reverse point of view - instead of guiding the audience into the mindset of the victim, he's instead shaping his writing so that the audience identifies with the eagerness of the murderer. If this is the case, it suggests that on some level, the laywright is suggesting that Orestes' desire for violent vengeance can be found in every human, being including those in his audience, a perspective which, in turn, takes the play out of the realm of the myth-specific and into the area of archetypal universality.

The quote on p. 190 has several layers of meaning. First, there seems to be a deliberate echo of the serpent dream (see Play 2, Part 2 - Summary/Analysis), in which Orestes was symbolically portrayed as a poisonous snake at Clytemnestra's breast. On another level, the "milk" described in the quote can also be seen as the "milk" of murderousness" - in the same way as Orestes sucked life from his mother's breast, he also sucked the power and the will to kill. Finally, there is another possible link here to Shakespeare's Macbeth (see Play 2, Part 1 Analysis). In that play, Lady Macbeth calls to the spirits of darkness to "unsex" her, and to take the milk in her breasts for "gall" (poison).

Play 2, Part 4 (9.190-196)

Play 2, Part 4 (9.190-196) Summary

Orestes is revealed, standing over the body of Aegisthus. Clytemnestra cries out in grief; Orestes speaks sharply to her, and Clytemnestra suddenly recognizes him, pleading with him to remember that she's his mother in language that clearly echoes the imagery of her dream (see "Quotes", p. 190). Orestes asks Pylades for advice - should he kill his mother or have mercy on her? Pylades, in his only speech in the play, reminds Orestes that the Oracle told him that he must take revenge. Orestes thanks him for the reminder and proclaims that he will kill Clytemnestra, so that she lies with Aegisthus in death as she lay with him in life. In short terse sentences, Clytemnestra pleads for her life, angry and defiant and imploring by turns. Orestes, however, reminds her of all the sins she's committed, saying it's those sins that are ending her life, not him, and adding that her terrifying dream is about to come true. They disappear into the palace. The Chorus speaks at triumphant, poetic length about how justice has finally been served, commenting that "Night is past. Behold the day!"

Orestes reappears, this time with the bodies of both Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, speaking ironically of how they've kept their word to live, rule and die together. He comments that Aegisthus has received the same justice that all adulterers would and wonders aloud how the evil, devious, once powerful Clytemnestra now appears to the Chorus and to the world. He holds up the cloth in which Agamemnon was trapped before he was killed, claiming that it's evidence that justice was served. Finally, he reminds the Chorus that he was doing what he was told by Apollo through the Oracle and expresses his intention to return to the Oracle to receive absolution for what he's done. The Chorus reassures him that what he did was right.

Suddenly Orestes cries out, in the throes of a terrifying vision (see "Quotes", p. 195). The Chorus comments that they see nothing and urge him to calm himself, but Orestes cries out that he sees the Eumenides, goddesses of revenge, who he believes have come to take revenge on him for killing his mother. The Chorus urges him to remember that Apollo will defend him, but Orestes flees, crying out that the Furies are pursuing him. The Chorus calls out a brief prayer for Orestes to find peace, and then wonders aloud when/whether the family will finally be freed from its ancient curse.

Play 2, Part 4 (9.190-196) Analysis

There are several important points to note about this section of the play. The first is that it contains the play's climax, and, indeed, the climax of the trilogy. Yes, the killing of Agamemnon in the first play and the judgment of Athena in the third are, in their own ways, also climaxes. But those two moments lack the sense of convergence of the moment here.

The killing of Agamemnon in Play1 is the climax of that play, but in the overall scheme of the entire trilogy, it's simply a stepping stone, moving the play forward on its more global narrative and thematic path. It's violent and intense, but ultimately transitional. The judgment of Athena, on the other hand, is the trilogy's moral climax, the destination of that same narrative and thematic path, but it lacks the visceral and emotional impact of both the Agamemnon and Clytemnestra killings. The murder here, by contrast, is both the narrative and the moral centerpiece of the entire trilogy. The action throughout has been building to this point, and is entirely defined by it afterwards - the trial that follows makes up the entire dramatic action of the third play, making this moment the linchpin of the trilogy's thematic consideration of the morality of revenge.

Another element worth consideration here is Pylades' speech as mentioned in the Summary; it is the only point at which he speaks in the play and indeed the trilogy. There are certainly opportunities and reasons for him to speak earlier, but it seems clear that the playwrights' intent is to give his words additional dramatic/thematic importance by having them be the only ones he says. He essentially cuts straight to the heart of the matter with none of the lengthily-described doubts of Orestes, the grandstanding of Agamemnon, the self-dramatization of Cassandra, the pouting of Aegisthus, or the aggressiveness of Clytemnestra. Pylades here distills the matter of the play into three simple sentences, and as such is both a narrative and thematic catalyst for the action to follow.

It's also important to consider Clytemnestra here, specifically, what she says in the moments before her death. Is she merely trying to manipulate Orestes into sparing her life, or does she genuinely feel that as her son, he has a responsibility to spare her no matter what she did? She's essentially saying that because she gave him life, he should give her her life. On the other hand, she's also quite clearly self righteous about what she did to Agamemnon and feels that she is beyond earthly justice. Ultimately, her actions here reveal her to be an immensely complex character, easily the most fully (archetypally?) human of the entire trilogy.

Play 3, Part 1 (p. 199-205)

Play 3, Part 1 (p. 199-205) Summary

"The Eumenides" The first part of this play takes place at the Oracle of Delphi. The Oracle, a woman, invokes the presence and the power of all the gods, imploring their guidance as she issues her prophecies. She then speaks at poetic length of her wonder and fear at seeing "a man red-handed, with blood-dabbled blade ... [and] seated there before him ... a troop of women ... not women, nay ... they are dark of hue/and altogether hideous, breathing out/Their snorting breath in gusts not to be borne/Distilling from their eyelids drops of hate." After praying to Apollo for guidance in what's to follow, the source of her vision is revealed - Orestes and the Furies (in Greek, the Eumenides), collapsed in exhaustion before Apollo's altar.

Apollo himself appears, offering his support for Orestes even as he describes in a lengthy ode how Orestes has been pursued by the Eumenides and must travel to Athens to seek justice from that city's patron goddess, Athena, the goddess of justice herself. Orestes wakens, expressing his gratitude for Apollo's guidance. Apollo tells him to go, uttering a blessing as Orestes leaves. Apollo then disappears.

Clytemnestra's ghost appears, crying out to the Eumenides to wake up and continue to chase Orestes and pursue vengeance for her murder. As the Eumenides continue to slumber, Clytemnestra urges them to dream that they are hunting Orestes and destroying him. Suddenly she vanishes, and the Chorus / Eumenides awakens, suddenly and angrily aware that their prey has disappeared. They complain about what "this younger brood of gods will do," suggesting that the Eumenides is an ancient and just power that cannot be denied. Apollo reappears, ordering the Chorus/Eumenides to leave his sacred spot, claiming that their very existence is blasphemous and likening them to torturers (see "Quotes", p.204). The Eumenides argue that they're simply pursuing their ancient right to punish those who kill their mothers, but Apollo argues that Clytemnestra committed as dark a crime by killing her husband "since fate-appointed wedlock well observed/Twixt man and wife is mightier than an oath." Apollo also asserts that Orestes was justified in killing Clytemnestra as he himself (Apollo) decreed but offers to submit the case to Athena, goddess of justice, for judgment. The Chorus / Eumenides vow to continue their pursuit, and Apollo vows to continue offering his protection.

Play 3, Part 1 (p. 199-205) Analysis

The first element to consider here is structural. These first speeches, like those of the other plays in the trilogy, and indeed of most other Classical Greek plays (drama and comedy alike) function as exposition, or as setting up/defining the context of the dramatic action. In other words, the structure of the plot rests upon the narrative foundations defined here - that Orestes has been pursued by the Eumenides, that both

Orestes and the Eumenides are fatigued by the length and intensity of the pursuit, and that Apollo is intervening in the same way as he did earlier in Orestes' story when Apollo instructed Orestes to take vengeance on Clytemnestra. This, in turn, is a development of one of the key aspects of the trilogy, and a second important element in this section - its exploration of the intimate, intense, day-to-day relationship between humanity and the gods (see "Characters - The Gods") and humanity's relative lack of free will.

A third key element to consider in this section is the development of one of the play's secondary themes, its perspective on womanhood. There are three points to keep in mind. First, it's interesting to note that the spirits of vengeance (the Eumenides) are female - does the playwright intend to suggest that a thirst for violent vengeance is a female characteristic? A second point is that Orestes is essentially ineffectual until urged on by Electra and the Trojan women in Play 2. Perhaps he is the exception that proves the rule (that a need for violent vengeance is a feminine trait). The point is arguable but becomes less so when a third point is considered - that it's ultimately indisputable that the most vocal and driven proponents of revenge in this play are female.

Clytemnestra, the doomed Cassandra, even the somewhat bloodthirsty Trojan women in The Libation Bearers all cry out for revenge for the perceived wrongs done to them. Yes, Orestes, a male, is eager to take revenge for what happened to his father, but he has not been personally wronged - his father was wronged, but he has not been. In this, it's possible to see that the playwright might be suggesting that women in general have been wronged by men - that males have made assumptions about them, their feelings and abilities, and the women are justified in seeking/taking revenge. Support for this idea can be found in the relationship between Clytemnestra and the Male Chorus in Play 1, in which she accuses them of exactly that - making assumptions. It's at least partly to prove those assumptions wrong that she attacks Agamemnon. Support can also be found in the actions of the Eumenides here; they are female spirits, essentially taking revenge on a male who attacked a woman in revenge for her taking revenge on a man. In other words, it's women sticking together against men sticking together. The point is not made to suggest that at its core The Oresteia should be read as a battle of the sexes, but rather to suggest that gender roles/relationships do play a certain thematic role in defining both dramatic conflict and thematic intent.

On the other hand, it's also indisputable that the embodiment of reason and justice in the play is also female—the goddess Athena, who appears in the following section. Does her presence suggest that the playwright's intent is, in fact, to portray two sides to the feminine psyche - the vengeful, which must be tempered by the just? Perhaps he is simply suggesting that balance between the two opposing forces in any/all humanity must be struck, and the fact that advocates on both sides of the argument are female is merely coincidence.

Play 3, Part 2 (205-215)

Play 3, Part 2 (205-215) Summary

Some time later, Orestes arrives at the shrine of Athena in Athens. In a prayer that indicates he's had a long and hard journey, he prays that he be welcomed and that his case be heard fairly. The Chorus/Eumenides arrive, having tracked Orestes down (see "Quotes", p. 206) and eager to act upon their bloodthirsty desire for revenge - "thy living limbs," they chant, "shalt yield in turn / Red pulp of thy fair flesh to be devoured". Finally, they comment that his evident desperation for aid from Athena is fruitless, but he cries out that time has washed him clean of his sin, and that Athena will decide in his favor. The Chorus/Eumenides claim that neither Apollo nor Athena can help him and perform a lengthy poetic ode/dance celebrating their power, their inevitability, their agelessness, and their divine right.

Athena appears, having heard Orestes' prayers and flown from Troy, where she has been taking possession of the land won for her by the Greeks. She asks Orestes and the Chorus/Eumenides to identify themselves saying they are strange to her. The Chorus/ Eumenides introduce themselves first, presenting their claim for revenge upon Orestes for killing Clytemnestra, claiming he's unfit to speak for himself and agreeing to abide by Athena's decree. Athena then asks Orestes to explain himself. He tells her he's the son of Agamemnon, who, as Orestes reminds Athena, was one of the warriors she favored in the Trojan War. He tells her Agamemnon was slain by Clytemnestra, and that he (Orestes) slew Clytemnestra in revenge. He also tells her he was guided to this action by Apollo and claims that Apollo must also share in some responsibility for what happened. Finally, he vows to accept Athena's judgment as final. Athena pronounces that on the one hand, the case is too complicated for a single man to decide, but on the other hand it's out of her jurisdiction as goddess. She therefore appoints a council of Athens' elders to hear the case and pass judgment. With that she disappears, and the Chorus/Eumenides again complain of how the young gods, with their "rash-brained spirit of change/stir confusion rude and strange". They speak again, at angry and poetic length, of how their right to justice is ancient and inviolable, of how human beings must learn to fear them, and how if a man doesn't fear them he will be destroyed.

Play 3, Part 2 (205-215) Analysis

The first thing to note about this section is the Chorus' bloodthirsty description of what will happen to Orestes when they catch him. This seems to be a deliberate echo of the events two generations ago when Orestes' grandfather Atreus killed his brother's sons and fed his brother their flesh.

The second noteworthy element here is that it is essentially a courtroom drama, a sort of Law and Order of its time. In fact, it seems that the intent of both the playwright and his narrative is to have an audience believe that this is the very first courtroom drama -

that what is being played out is the myth/fable of how legal justice came into being, as opposed to natural justice, as represented by the Eumenides. This, in turn, takes the play's possible core meaning onto another level, making it somewhat a parable about the dangers of revenge (i.e., a more primal state of being) and even more a parable of the benefits of justice (i.e., a more advanced state of being). In other words, it's possible to see that at this point in its narrative, The Oresteia becomes a tale of how humanity, with the help of the gods, discovers a better part of itself.

An intriguing component to this aspect of the story is the way in which the Eumenides perceive themselves as "old gods" being usurped by the will and ways of the "young gods," Apollo and Athena. As such, they are manifestations of a sometimes uneasy part of human existence, the resistance to change.

Finally, in this section both the third play and the trilogy as a whole are building to their moral/thematic climax, as the intensity of both the intellectual and emotional arguments increases.

Play 3, Part 3 (p.215-230)

Play 3, Part 3 (p.215-230) Summary

Athena reappears, summoning her court of elders. Apollo then appears, announcing himself as a witness in Orestes' favor and proclaiming his willingness to enter into the proceedings as Athena wills. Athena calls on the Chorus/Eumenides to present its case first. The Chorus/Eumenides questions Orestes about what he did and why. Orestes admits that he killed Clytemnestra but claims he did so under Apollo's guidance, and that he was acting out of a determination to avenge Agamemnon's death. Pressed by the Chorus/Eumenides, Orestes turns to Apollo and asks the god to say, once and for all, whether he was justified. Apollo proclaims that in telling Orestes to do what he did he (Apollo) was only passing on Zeus's decrees relating to the nature of justice. He also reminds Athena of the humiliating circumstances of Agamemnon's death and claims that "she who is called the mother of the child/Is not its parent, but the nurse of seed/Implanted in begetting. He that sows/Is author of the shoot ..." In other words, Apollo claims that the right and position of the father is more important than that of the mother and points to Athena herself, who had no mother, but who sprang whole and complete from her father Zeus's forehead, as proof. He concludes by saying that if forgiven, Orestes will be a living example of the true power and value of justice. The Chorus/Eumenides rest their case, and Athena calls for a vote of the judges, naming them the Aeropagus and reminding them to remember the traditions of justice, strength and wisdom upon which the community of Athens was founded. As the Aeropagus votes, Athena and the Chorus / Eumenides argue about whose power is more valid and more potent (another manifestation of the young gods/old gods conflict).

Before the judges' votes are counted Athena proclaims her support for Orestes, offering exactly the same justification that Apollo named. The result of the judges' vote is revealed that their verdict is evenly split. Athena's vote in favor of Orestes, however, means that he is freed. Orestes thanks Athena effusively and gratefully, vowing that he and Mycenae will live in peace forever and adding that when he dies, he will haunt any of his successors who bring war into the world.

As Orestes runs out, the Chorus/Eumenides make venomous vows that they will destroy Athens, refusing to accept Athena's assurances that from this moment on they will be held in great respect and will have temples built to them. She assures them that as elder gods they will be revered and endowed with great, albeit more humane, power, and she urges them to become part of "the triumph of all good." The Chorus/Eumenides finally agree to become what Athena desires - thoughtful agents of nature and of justice, work-ing towards the overall good of all life (see "Quotes", p. 228). Attendants arrive, and un-der Athena's direction lead the newly docile and reformed Chorus/Eumenides into the underground cavern which will be both their new dwelling place and the site of the new temple dedicated to the new justice they now embody.

Play 3, Part 3 (p.215-230) Analysis

Aside from bringing the Orestes/Eumenides/vengeance plot to conclusion, this section is noteworthy for the thematic statement that closes it, specifically, Athena's urging of the Eumenides to release their angry desire for vengeance and work with her for "the triumph of all good." There are echoes here of contemporary, non-denominational spirituality (or perhaps contemporary spirituality carries with it echoes of this statement), that there is only one spiritual truth, and that is that all beings, humans and gods, exist to serve "the triumph of all good."

That said, there is an undeniably patriarchal overtone to the judgment passed by Athena and to the arguments from Apollo that lead her to that judgment. This is, in all likelihood, a manifestation of the socio-cultural belief systems of the day - that men had/have the power, the responsibility, and indeed the right to dominance. A question to consider here is this - does the juxtaposition of these two thematic statements mean that in the mind of the goddess (and indeed of the playwright) the greater good means male domination? Or is the greater good ultimately transcendent of gender, since both the female Eumenides and the male Areopagus are, in essence, reminded to put compassion first and foremost into their minds and hearts when making/passing judgment.

And what of Orestes? His tortures are ended; the curse upon his family has apparently run its course, and he vows to live out the rest of his days in peace. It's important to remember, however, that after she killed Agamemnon and Cassandra, Clytemnestra also vowed to live in peace ... and look where she ended up. It's possible, therefore, to see Orestes' statement that he will haunt any of his descendants who bring war into the world as yet further continuance of the family curse of violence and revenge, just in a less overt form. In any case, in its resolution of Orestes' story, the play seems to be making the thematic statement that that resolution is not only what he deserves, but is an archetypal experience of justice - that is, transcendence of earthly deeds and movement towards a larger, more spiritual truth, one grounded in "the triumph of all good." The ultimate question of an audience, therefore, might well be this - does Orestes' freedom truly serve that triumph?

Characters

Clytemnestra

Clytemnestra is Agamemnon's wife, and is the only character to appear in all three plays of the trilogy (in the third she appears as a ghost). In some versions of the Atreus/Agamemnon myth she is a daughter of an Amazon, a legendary race of warrior women, while in others she is the sister of Helen of Troy, the woman Agamemnon and the rest of the Greeks fought a ten-year war to rescue. Either way, she is the embittered, angered mother of Agamemnon's sacrificed daughter. During Agamemnon's ten years of absence, she has nursed a grudge, planned her murderous revenge, and found solace in the arms of Aegisthus, Agamemnon's rival and Thyestes' only surviving son. Thyestes has his own reasons for wanting Agamemnon dead (see "Atreus", above, and "Aegisthus" below). Clytemnestra is strong, fierce, passionate, desperate, and manipulative. She switches back and forth between the loving wife to Agamemnon/mother to Orestes and the violently-vengeful embodiment of a wronged woman, using whatever tactic she can in order to get what she wants, either Agamemnon's death or her own survival. In the eyes of some scholars/analysts, Clytemnestra is seen as an archetypal figure, a manifestation of the fiercely-protective "mother bear" aspect of woman/motherhood. It's important to note that it's through the treatment of Clytemnestra that the question of the play's view of women is most vividly explored (see "Themes - The Nature of Womanhood").

Agamemnon

Agamemnon is the title character of the first play of this trilogy and plays a central, if absent and catalytic, role in the second and third. In the second play his children, Orestes and Electra, act murderously out of a desire to take revenge for Agamemnon's death, while in the third play Orestes faces a trial resulting from those actions and invokes both Agamemnon's name and the means of his death in his defense. In the play's backstory (the history of the characters before the action of the play begins), Agamemnon is one of the commanders of the Greek army during the Trojan War and has been gone for ten years. While preparing to sail for battle, he was faced with the choice of either sacrificing his daughter to the goddess Artemis in order to gain a wind favorable for sailing to Troy, or not to go to Troy at all. Agamemnon chose loyalty to his brother, fellow king and countryman, Menelaus, whose wife Helen had been kidnapped by the Trojans, and who the Greeks were sailing to rescue, over the more emotional ties to his daughter and the rest of his family. In other words, he chose power over love and family in the same way as his father Atreus did and, as a result, suffered brutal, humiliating death at the hands of his embittered wife. His choice has echoes in his order to his wife to welcome the Trojan princess Cassandra, obviously Agamemnon's concubine, into their home. Again he chooses to exhibit power over both women rather than display compassion to either. In the story of Agamemnon, then, there can be seen

a clear warning about the sort of power-related choices great men, and in fact humanity in general, should make.

Atreus

This character (Agamemnon's father) doesn't appear in any of the three plays, but is referred to several times. His actions (the killing of his brother Thyestes' children and the tricking of Thyestes into eating their flesh) are, in the minds of both the human characters and the immortals (i.e., the gods and the Eumenides) the source of the fatal, so-called "curse" that has followed Atreus' descendants throughout the years. Atreus can therefore be seen as a symbolic embodiment of the dangerous, corruptive, potentially evil power of ambition - he wanted absolute control over his kingdom and so did whatever it took to put Thyestes out of the picture. The mythic stories of Agamemnon, Orestes and Electra, as well as of Agamemnon's sacrificed daughter, Iphigenia, are often referred to under the umbrella heading of "The House of Atreus".

Aegisthus

Aegisthus is Clytemnestra's lover and appears in the first two plays of the trilogy. He is the only surviving son of Thyestes (see "Atreus", above), and as such feels he, and not Agamemnon should, be governing Mycenae. That and his own desire for revenge (in his case, for what Atreus did to his family) make him almost as eager as Clytemnestra to see Agamemnon dead. He is, however, substantially less effective at achieving his goal - Clytemnestra actually does the dirty work while Aegisthus merely claims the rewards. He comes across as weak, petulant, childish and selfish, but because he is a man in a patriarchal world, the infinitely-more powerful Clytemnestra appeases him and eventually surrenders her right to power to him (see the end of Play 1). Because of his having played a role in the murder of Agamemnon, Aegisthus is killed by Orestes at the end of the second play in the trilogy, "The Libation Bearers".

Orestes

Orestes is the son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. He is the central character in the second and third plays of the trilogy and is spoken of by Clytemnestra in the first play as having been sent into exile for his own protection from potential Trojan retribution for the war. This is partially true - while Agamemnon was in Troy, Orestes did go into exile, but while he did so for his own protection, it was not from the Trojans, but from the increasingly vengeful Clytemnestra, driven more and more mad with grief and rage over her daughter's murder. Conquering his fear of his mother, Orestes returns to Mycenae determined to take revenge for Agamemnon's murder, having been ordered to do so by the god Apollo. But because Orestes' murder of Clytemnestra is held to be a more heinous crime against nature than Clytemnestra's killing of his father, Orestes is driven to near madness by the Eumenides, the primeval goddesses of justice who tortuously and relentlessly pursue anyone who has both broken and evaded what they consider

natural law. Orestes, a well intentioned and loyal son, seeks refuge in the temple of Athena, where he pleads for, and receives justice.

Cassandra

Cassandra appears only in the first play. She is a captured Trojan princess brought home to Mycenae by Agamemnon, and while it's never declared outright, it seems fairly obvious (particularly to Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife) that Agamemnon intends her to be his concubine or mistress. As she says in Agamemnon, the beautiful Cassandra was given the gift of prophecy by the god Apollo, in the hopes that she would give herself to him. But when she rejected both Apollo and his gift, he angrily decreed that she would retain the gift, but would never be believed. In short, the Cassandra story (sub-plot) mirrors and/or echoes that of Agamemnon and his family - Cassandra is herself a victim of revenge, that of Apollo, in the same way as Agamemnon and Clytemnestra.

Electra

Electra is the daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, appearing only in the second play of the trilogy. She is in many ways an antithesis to Clytemnestra. While both women are victims, trapped by circumstances and desperate to see those circumstances change, Electra, unlike her mother, is unable and/or unwilling to actually take any action to make that change happen. Instead, she leaves true vengeance to Orestes, and is given no opportunity to experience any sort of triumph or relief. Electra is developed further in two other plays from the classical Greek canon (one by Euripides, one by Sophocles) in which she is the central/title character.

Pylades, Orestes' Nurse

These two characters appear only in the second play of the Trilogy, and even then only briefly. Pylades is introduced as Orestes' friend and traveling companion and is present throughout the action, but only speaks once - albeit at a critical moment of the action, at which point his words convince Orestes to go ahead and kill his mother in revenge for her murdering his father. As such, he can be seen as an embodiment of the dangers of giving in to the desire for revenge. If Pylades hadn't said what he said at the moment he said it, Orestes might not have killed his mother, might not have been driven to near madness by guilt and remorse. Also, he might not have ended up living out the rest of his life in exile (his future as defined in the final moments of The Eumenides).

The Nurse only appears in one brief scene, but performs two key functions. First, she is a passing, but potent, portrayal of genuine maternal affection of the sort that seems utterly missing from the violent, manipulative Clytemnestra. In other words, the contrasting character of the Nurse serves to make Clytemnestra's tortured bitterness even more vivid. Second, the Nurse performs a key function in the plot as she is used by Orestes to lure Aegisthus into what he thinks is safety. How the Nurse feels when

she learns that she has, in fact, been used to lure Aegisthus to his death is left unexplored and unrevealed.

The Chorus

The Chorus was a traditional element of Classical Greek theater, and consisted of a number of actors speaking with the voice, attitude and perspective of a single character. There are two important elements to note about the Choruses in The Oresteia. First, in each play the Chorus has its own identity: in Agamemnon, they are the old men of Mycenae; in The Libation Bearers, they are female Trojan prisoners-of-war/servants; in The Eumenides, they are the Eumenides themselves, primeval goddesses of ancient, natural law. It's important to note here that in original (Classical) performances, both male and female choruses would have been portrayed by male actors as would all the characters. The second thing to note is that the role played by the Chorus in the action of all three plays is significantly different from the role traditionally played by the Chorus in Greek theater. Usually, the Chorus merely observed and commented on the action of the play, rather than entering directly into it. While the Male Chorus in Agamemnon essentially follows true to this form, the Choruses in Libation Bearers and Eumenides function differently; they participate directly in the action and are actually characters involved in the story rather than merely observers and commentators.

The Gods (Zeus, Artemis, Apollo, Athena)

For the Ancient Greeks, their religious/spiritual beliefs were central to both life and art. The presence of the gods was felt in almost every facet of day-to-day existence, in the fire in the kitchen (Hestia) and in the fields (Demeter), in volcanoes (Hephaestus) and in the sea (Poseidon), in sex (Aphrodite) and in war (Ares). The major gods represented powerful forces of nature and/or fundamental human experiences, while the minor gods represented things like the rainbow, individual streams, or a type of flower. In short, this inextricable weaving between the spiritual and physical worlds was a defining characteristic of Classical Greek culture, which makes the presence of the gods in Classical Greek theater an expression of a basic societal truth - that there was a spiritual element to every aspect of physical existence.

Several gods are mentioned in The Oresteia, but only four have/had a direct impact on the action. The first two never actually appear, but their influence is undeniably present. Zeus, the king of the gods, is evoked several times as the ultimate power and the source of ultimate justice. Artemis, the goddess of the hunt and of the moon, was the goddess to whom Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter in order to gain a favorable wind; in short, it was Artemis' bloodthirsty capriciousness that sets the second stage of the Atreus' family's tragedy in motion. Apollo, god of the sun and music and prophecy, is mentioned by Orestes in Libation Bearers and appears in Eumenides, as the god who ultimately guides and supports him in his acts of vengeance. Finally, Athena, goddess of wisdom and war, appears in Eumenides as the ultimate arbiter of justice, casting the final vote in favor of Orestes. It's important to note that while the trilogy as a whole is, for

the most part, an exploration of the human experience of vengeance, The Eumenides also portrays the myth of how the system of justice in Athens came into being (see "Objects/Places", The Aeropagus) - as a direct manifestation of the will, power and presence of the gods.

Objects/Places

The Oresteia

The trilogy itself is an important object, in that it's one of the very few, and perhaps the only, surviving example(s) of the predominant form of Classical Greek theater, which is, in turn, the foundation of all historical and contemporary dramatic narrative.

Greek theater had its origins in rough-edged, unscripted religious ceremonies and festivals. As it evolved into the recounting of stories, myths and legends, it also introduced the use of actors and choruses to dramatize those stories, rather than just employing story tellers and/or clowns to tell them. The high point of this process of evolution was the trilogy, in which playwrights wrote a series of plays exploring the various thematic/spiritual/ human elements of a single myth. The Atreus stories, the Oedipus tale, and the narrative of how Prometheus came to side with humanity rather than with the gods are just a few of the chronicles given new depth and resonance through theatrical presentation. The Oresteia is the most complete example left to contemporary culture by history and has been described by many critics and scholars as the high point of the evolution of classical Greek theater.

Mycenae

Mycenae is the city/state of Greece governed by King Agamemnon at the time of his departure for the Trojan War. When The Oresteia begins, it has been governed in his absence by his wife/queen, Clytemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus.

Agamemnon's Palace

This is the center of Agamemnon's power, and the setting for the murders in the first two plays of the Trilogy. It's important to note that the killings that set the inevitable, doomed course for Agamemnon and his family - the slaughter of his brother's children by Agamemnon's father, Atreus - also took place here. It's also important to note that freedom from the family curse comes to the last male in the line, Orestes, at Delphi, far away from Mycenae and its royal palace.

The Carpet of Purple Cloth

This carpet is put down by Clytemnestra for Agamemnon to walk on as he goes into the palace upon his return (Play 1). It represents the path of blood and destruction walked by Agamemnon, his ancestors, his spouse and his descendants.

Clytemnestra's Ax and Agamemnon's Bath

Clytemnestra uses an ax to kill Agamemnon while he's helpless in his bathtub. Throughout literature and history, the ax has been portrayed as a weapon/symbol of treachery, while the bathtub has been similarly portrayed as a weapon/symbol of helplessness and humiliation.

Agamemnon's Grave

This is the site of much of the action in the second part of the second play. Electra and the women of the palace gather to offer prayers to the gods and to the soul of the murdered king. It's here that Electra and Orestes recognize each other, both in terms of their physical identities and their mutual spiritual/emotional desire for vengeance.

Orestes' Lock of Hair

Electra's discovery of Orestes' hair and her realization of who it belongs to, is a key plot device, supplying as it does a key turning point in the development of the play's narrative. That is to say, following the discovery of the hair, the plot changes direction and assumes its inevitable course towards the confrontation between justice and revenge.

The Oracle at Delphi

The Oracle was, in both art and life, a place at which men and women could connect directly to the will of the gods, a priestess, apparently gifted with an intimate relation with and understanding of both the god Apollo and of the course/meaning of life, offered guidance to anyone who came to see her. In broad mythic/symbolic terms, the Oracle represented a conduit between humanity and the mysteries of the universe. In specific relation to the action of the play, Orestes receives what he believes to be a direct command from the god Apollo to take revenge upon his mother, Clytemnestra, for her murder of his father, Agamemnon. To look at the latter in the context of the former (the specific in the context of the mythic), there is the sense that Orestes is commanded to, and ultimately obeys, a fundamental law of existence—that the father should not be slain by the mother. This idea is supported by the fact that at the end of the Trilogy, Athena decrees that Orestes acted justly.

Athens

Athens, one of Ancient Greece's most powerful and influential city/states, was according to myth, founded by Athena, goddess of wisdom, justice and war. There is, therefore, a direct relationship between Athena's "jurisdictions," for lack of a better word, and the fact that Athens was historically one of the most military, powerful city-states, as well as the

seat of the first courts of law, the origins of which are dramatized, almost as a sub-plot, in The Eumenides (see "The Aeropagus" below).

The Aeropagus

The Aeropagus was the court established in Ancient Athens, and is historically regarded as one of the first, if not the first, non-governmental judiciaries in history. With the Aeropagus, justice became administered and determined by the common people, endowed with collective wisdom by the gods, as opposed to administered and determined by the government, endowed with power and money and whose decisions were often defined within those parameters.

Themes

Revenge

Revenge is the key motivator of action throughout the play. Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon out of a desire to take revenge on him for having sacrificed their daughter, while Aegisthus goes along with her plans out of a desire to avenge the murder and torture of his family by Agamemnon's father. In The Libation Bearers, Orestes murders Aegisthus and Clytemnestra out of a desire to take revenge for the murder of Agamemnon. Finally, in The Eumenides, the title characters are desperate to take revenge on Orestes for having committed the ultimate sin of matricide. It's important to note that in all this, the attitude of the play towards both the act and the concept of revenge is ultimately ambivalent. On the one hand, portrayal of the characters taking revenge is so balanced as to be almost sympathetic. This is particularly true of Clytemnestra, who acts out of a deep, furious, betrayed anguish over what she sees as the senseless murder of her beloved daughter - her reaction (if not her action) is a very human one. On the other hand, there is the play's portrayal of Orestes, who is emotionally and spiritually tortured by the Eumenides as a direct result of his act of vengeance. Are the Eumenides, perhaps, an externalization - a theatricalized projection of Orestes' own sense of guilt and remorse? Ultimately, the play's thematic statement on the subject of revenge seems to be that while the desire for revenge can be overpowering and perhaps even justified, the consequences of acting on that desire can be dangerous to say the least.

Destiny

There is the very strong sense throughout all three plays that the characters are living out fates and lives preordained for them by the gods - their predetermined destinies. This sense of a lack of free will at the core of human existence was a fundamental element of Greek spirituality. Circumstances, events, choices - in the Ancient Greek philosophical system, were all predetermined, and nothing could be escaped. Many classical Greek dramas explored and dramatized the relationship between human beings and their destiny. In the case of The Oresteia, the relationship has a certain degree of consciousness about it. Clytemnestra, Aegisthus, Orestes, the Eumenides, even Electra - all have a degree of understanding/belief that what they're doing is what they're meant to be doing, that it's not only right in terms of individual morality, but right in terms of the ways of the universe, of time, and of the will of the gods. By contrast, consider the other notable Greek tragedy grounded in a thematic exploration of the relationship between human beings and destiny - the saga of Oedipus. His acting out of his destiny is completely unconscious. He has no sense whatsoever that he's living out the path foretold of him. In these two contrasting premises can be found the essential contrast in the classical Greek perception of destiny - sometimes you know and sometimes you don't, but either way, life is happening to you the way it was meant to.

Family Relationships

On a secondary, thematic level, the action of The Oresteia explores the question of what's considered a right and/or a wrong way for members of a family to act. Granted, some of the play's points on this subject are almost comically obvious. For example, a man, no matter how ambitious, simply doesn't kill his brother's children and then force his brother to eat their flesh, as Atreus did to his brother Thyestes. There are also, however, very serious and complicated questions about family relationships that both define and motivate the action. To whom do children owe the most loyalty, their father or their mother? Orestes and Electra believe the former and act out of that belief. The gods also come down on that side of the argument, and the play's resolution seems to suggest that the playwright himself is also of that mind. But there are powerful arguments put forth by the Eumenides (and, in her vulnerable moments, Clytemnestra) in support of the latter. Again, the play seems to be ambivalent, leaving it up to the audience to make up their own minds.

A secondary, but no less significant, family relationship is that between Orestes and Electra, which is essentially one of mutual support - us against the world, to coin a phrase. It's interesting to consider what might have happened to/in that relationship if the character of Electra had been developed further and been included in the action of the third play of the trilogy. For further consideration of the relationship between Orestes and Electra, see two plays by the Greek playwrights Sophocles and Euripides, each titled Electra. Meanwhile, it's also interesting to note that for the two siblings, consideration of the fact that Agamemnon sacrificed the life of their sister so he could go to war doesn't seem to enter their thoughts at all.

The final family relationship that appears in the play is that between Zeus, the king of the gods, and his two very different children. Athena, who sprang whole and mature from the side of Zeus's head, and Apollo, Zeus's son by a minor goddess, both side with Orestes against the Eumenides, in no small part because they feel intense loyalty towards their father. This, however, raises a theoretical question - would they have felt and judged the same way if they had been born to the powerful mother-goddess Hera after being fathered by a lowly mortal or minor god?

Womanhood

There are several interesting portrayals of female characters in The Oresteia - the vengeful, grieving Clytemnestra, the victimized Cassandra and Electra, the bloodthirsty chorus of Eumenides, the cautiously-manipulative chorus of Trojan slave women and even Orestes' loving nurse. The first thing to consider about these characters is the way other characters perceive them. In the first play, the chorus of men ultimately agrees with Clytemnestra's accusation that they see her as weak and given over to emotion. The chorus ultimately comments that her actions in killing Agamemnon and Cassandra are inappropriate to her gender. Also in the first play, Cassandra is clearly perceived as a possession rather than a woman, albeit one to be treated with respect, according to

Agamemnon. In the second play, Orestes, perhaps chauvinistically, tells Electra to wait in the house while he does the deed of vengeance, an act perhaps frustrating to Electra, whose desire for revenge is perhaps even stronger than that of Orestes - she has, after all, been living with Clytemnestra and her bloodthirstiness the entire time Orestes has been gone. The Nurse is merely someone whose tender feelings make her easy to be manipulated.

Finally, both female choruses (the Trojan slave women in The Libation Bearers, the Eumenides in The Eumenides) are perceived by other characters as ultimately ineffectual. The Trojan slave women stand by and watch Orestes kill the woman who's made them suffer, instead of being proactive and taking their own vengeance. Likewise, in the third play the power and desire of the Eumenides are denied by the male god Apollo, and in the end effectively neutered by the one genuinely-strong and righteous female character in the trilogy, Athena. But Athena's a full-blown goddess, great and powerful and just to boot and, as such, is the ultimate woman. The human women are all flawed, and to one degree or another, consciously or unconsciously, are driven by vengeance. Even the Nurse, whose genuine grief makes her vulnerable to a subconscious desire for revenge on those who sent Orestes away, leads Aegisthus to his death. In other words, Orestes wouldn't have died if Clytemnestra, as the Nurse believes, had sent him into exile.

In short, in the eyes of the playwright and of the society whose views he reflects, human women are all ultimately frail and perhaps flawed, and the Eumenides can be included in this. Even though they're minor goddesses, their desire for revenge is so much like that of the human Clytemnestra that they can be perceived as being extensions of humanity more than genuine manifestations of divine will. All in all, the play's attitude towards women ultimately seems patriarchal and repressive, a reflection of the time and context in which the play was written. For further consideration of this question see "Characters - Clytemnestra", "Play 3, Parts 1/3 - Summary /Analysis", and "Play 1, Parts 3/5 - Summary /Analysis".

Style

Point of View

As previously discussed (see "Characters - The Gods), The Oresteia is written from a point of view reflective of the culture of the time - specifically, that there was an inextricable, inevitable relationship between the physical human life and the various forces of nature and/or the human spirit. While contemporary religious systems are essentially monotheistic, or based in a belief in a single core God, the Greek religious system was pantheistic, or based in the belief in an almost infinite number of gods, albeit of various degrees of power and/or jurisdiction. These gods, in retrospect, can be seen as manifestations and/or evocations of larger, archetypal aspects of existence - male power based in the sky (Zeus), female power based in the earth (Demeter) and motherhood (Hera), the tension/attraction between the beautiful/sexual (Aphrodite) and the aggressive/life destroying (Ares) ... the list, as suggested, is practically endless. The point to note here is that in Greek religious thinking, these gods not only represented aspects of reality, they regularly manifested in reality. Most of the time, these manifestations were figurative - the power of Zeus, for example, manifesting in lightning, or the power of Demeter manifesting in the growing of grain. But what The Oresteia does is suggest that these manifestations were also literal - the gods literally and physically intervene in the affairs of humanity, as Athena does in The Eumenides (in creating Athens' justice system) and many other gods do throughout many other myths. In short, through the physical presence of the gods and the characters' intimate reactions and/or relationships with them, The Oresteia dramatizes the socio-cultural point of view that nature and humanity co-exist, affect each other, change each other, and ultimately are defined by each other. For what are gods and/or nature if not portrayed as such by human beings, and what are human beings if not shaped by nature?

Setting

There are two ways to consider the setting of these plays. The first is from a contemporary perspective, in which case the setting of the play is seen as an ancient blend of mythic and historical - while Athens, Mycenae, Delphi and Troy all existed and still physically exist in some form or another today. Agamemnon's palace and the events that unfolded there exist only in archetypal stories, fables, or myths. But in considering The Oresteia's setting from the perspective of the time in which the plays were written, several hundred years B.C.E., the mythic aspect of the stories has less significance. For the Ancient Greek audience Agamemnon's palace was real, as were the events that took place there. Setting therefore takes on an aspect almost of the documentary, and as a result, audiences of the time were, on some level, inspired to see the stories being played out in front of them as stories of their lives. Yes, The Oresteia is a story of kings and queens, but those kings and queens had actually lived. A contemporary parallel might be found in the recent Oscar-winning film The Queen, in which an actress

portrayed a real-life, historically-documented individual living through a real-life, historically-documented experience, all in a dramatized narrative. In other words, definition of the setting for The Oresteia's events can't be limited to where it physically takes place, but must also be considered in terms of where the events live in the audience's experience.

Language and Meaning

Any question of The Oresteia's language must first take into account the fact that most contemporary readings of it rely on translation, and as a result there are any number of ways in which it can be interpreted. There are translations in which the speeches of the Chorus (performed originally as songs rather than as speeches) are written in rhyming couplets, while there are other translations in which they're written in non-rhyming blank verse. Some translations use straightforward, more contemporary language, other translations attempt poetry. Ultimately, the essential story remains the same as does its essential meaning. As suggested above in the section on theme and point of view, meaning can be found in its portrayal of the relationship between humanity and the gods/destiny. Some would argue that that relationship is essentially the relationship between humanity and itself, if one operates from the premise that a god, any god, is a human attempt at fathoming the unfathomable mysteries of the universe. This, in fact, might be a way of looking at the question of translation - as a way of understanding that which, because we're not Ancient Greeks, is essentially not fully and truly understandable. And ultimately, isn't that ultimately the purpose of all language - to bring understanding where there was none?

Structure

As previously discussed (see "Objects/Places" - The Oresteia), the play is structured along the lines of most Greek dramas of the period - as three short plays exploring various aspects of a single theme and a single story. Comedies, by contrast, tended to explore their themes in single dramatic units, one play at a time. In the case of The Oresteia, the trilogy structure supports the essential framework of the story and its theme, in which the nature and repercussions of revenge are explored. Specifically, the first play dramatizes the initial act for which revenge is sought; the second play dramatizes the taking of that revenge; the third play dramatizes the consequences of that revenge. It is classic dramatic structure, common in one form or another to all dramatic writing since - set-up, complication, resolution.

There is also a traditional/formal structure within each play, commonly found in many classical Greek plays. Specifically, a dialogue scene with a character or characters is followed by an ode, or episode of poetry, in which the Chorus reflects on what has taken place. There are occasions in The Oresteia in which the boundaries of this usually rigid structure become more flexible. In all three plays, the Chorus dialogues on occasion with the characters; in The Libation Bearers the characters of Orestes and Electra participate in the choral odes; and in The Eumenides the odes are part of the action.

Specifically, the Chorus' speeches/songs are speeches to Athena and/or the Aeropagus, and take place while the other characters are still on the stage. The more common, reflective odes were usually recited when the other characters had left the stage, thus emphasizing the difference in function between the Chorus as commentators and the characters as participants. All that said, the overall structure of each play in the trilogy is essentially that of most, if not all, classical Greek theater.

Quotes

"A strange weight oppresses heart and tongue. Could the house speak, it might have much to tell. My lips will open, with my good will, only to those that know." Agamem-non, p. 112.

"No late libation, or incense-fume/Avails to save from a ruthless doom/The man who has angered, through mad desire/The Powers that burn, but need no fire." Agamemnon, p. 113.

"All praise to the power everlasting that punishes perfidy home!" Agamemnon, p. 121.

"The dark Erinyes in long lapse of time/Grind down to helpless poverty/Him who in ways of crime/Hath flourished, but in dim reverse of doom/Shall stain the luster of that odious bloom." Agamemnon, p. 124.

"Too many weak mortals are fond/Of the seeming of right, not regarding how Justice offended may frown." Agamemnon, p. 133

"There bides within [me]/A band of voices - all in unison/Yet neither sweet nor tuneful, for their song is not of blessing ... they cling to the walls: they hymn the primal curse/Their fatal hymn..." Agamemnon, p. 144.

"His soul on wing for Hades, his keen breath/Smote me with drops of slaughter, whose dark dew/refreshed my spirit, even as the bladed corn/That swells to the ear, delighteth in heaven's rain." Agamemnon, p.150.

"Story thus on story grows/To the dark and shameful close/Heaven-condemned, the race of man/Withers' neath the eternal ban" The Libation Bearers, p. 183.

"They scorn [Justice], but her pillars firmly stand/Her blade is forged by Fate's unfailing hand/And the slow Fury, fathomless of heart/Brings to the house her child to do his part." The Libation Bearers, p. 183.

"Work out the indulgence of sad wrath and win / thy mortal triumph, harboring grief within / But cutting off the murderers for their sin." The Libation Bearers, p. 189.

"O child, respect and pity / This breast, whereat thou often, soothed to slumber / Drained-est with baby mouth the bounteous milk" The Libation Bearers, p. 190.

"Profane not with your presence this fair shrine / But go where headsmen execute the doom / Where eyes are gouged, throats gashed ... where men, impaled alive / Moan long and bitterly." The Eumenides, p. 204

"Like a hound / Tracking the blood-marks of a wounded fawn / I quest and follow where the gore-drops lie" The Eumenides, p. 206.

"But ever may the genial inter-flowing / Of mirth for mirth, kindness for kindness, fill / All souls within the state / With unanimity of mild good will / And firm harmonious hate. Full many a public all that medicine shall abate." The Eumenides, p. 228.

Topics for Discussion

Consider the quote: "Profane not with your presence this fair shrine / But go where headsmen execute the doom / Where eyes are gouged, throats gashed ... where men, impaled alive / Moan long and bitterly," in which Apollo's imagery seems to indicate that revenge, as embodied in the Eumenides, is profane. Given that profane is, by definition, anti-god, discuss the implications of this idea. Is revenge profane? Is it anti-god, anti-spirit? Or is it a manifestation of true justice?

Discuss the concept of revenge. What in modern culture might be considered an act of revenge - by an individual ... by society ... by a group that perceives itself to be wronged. Consider specific events / circumstances, such as capital punishment, terrorist attacks, economic sanctions, etc. Debate the question of whether revenge is ever justified, or whether it ever achieves its desired result - whatever the desired result of revenge might actually be.

In what way does The Chorus in each play function as an externalization of a central character's emotional/spiritual state? Specifically, consider the relationship between the patriarchal Chorus of Men and Clytemnestra in Agamemnon ... the grieving Chorus of Women and Electra/Orestes in The Libation Bearers ... the relentless Chorus of Eumenides and both the wronged Clytemnestra (in all three plays) and the guilt-stricken Orestes in The Eumenides.

Compare the examination of revenge in The Oresteia to that undertaken by another famous, profoundly written play on the subject - William Shakespeare's Hamlet. What are the similarities / differences in circumstance? Between various characters? In thematic perspective?

Consider Clytemnestra - in particular, the comments on her character in Play 1, Part 5 Analysis. Debate the various interpretations of who she is, what she did, and why she did it. Is she an archetype of righteous maternal rage? Is she a monster? Is she merely deranged by love? Is she all the above? Is she something else? And, above all, does she deserve to be murdered by Orestes?

Examine the similarities/differences in the relationship between humanity and God in contemporary, western Judeo/Christian culture, and between humanity and the gods in Classical Greek culture. Consider the questions of human free will, the seeking of/reliance upon guidance, and the ways in which God/the gods are either manifestations of spirituality or projections of human need.

Is there a clear right and wrong in these plays (aside from the actions of Atreus, which are by just about any definition monstrous)? Is Agamemnon wrong to choose loyalty over family? Is Clytemnestra right to want to see Agamemnon punished for what he did to their daughter? Are Orestes and Electra wrong in wanting to see Clytemnestra punished?

It could be argued that the press/media is a contemporary version of a Greek chorus. It could also be argued that the incidents of the play are as colorful and sensationalist as many "news" stories that receive a lot of press/media coverage in contemporary society. Consider and dramatize ways that a "chorus" of contemporary media might cover the incidents narrated in the play. Consider also different media perspectives - a more so-called "conservative" perspective (from outlets such as Fox News), a culturally-diverse perspective (from an outlet such as Al-Jazeera), a more investigative perspective (from an outlet such as the CBC, CNN or the BBC), or a more personal perspective (from a personality such as Oprah Winfrey or Barbara Walters).