

The Siege and Fall of Troy Short Guide

The Siege and Fall of Troy by Robert Graves

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Overview

In *The Siege and Fall of Troy* Graves provides a modern retelling of Homer's epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

Graves relates the whole story of Troy, from its founding by Prince Scamander to the homecomings of the Greek heroes who survived the Trojan War. In his introduction to the book, Graves states: "English literature, to be properly understood, calls for as close a knowledge of the Trojan War as of the Bible: Helen's beauty, Odysseus' cunning, Hector's noble courage, Achilles' vulnerable heel, Ajax's madness, Agamemnon's murder, have all become proverbial."

But this work is more than a shortcut for learning the sources of classical allusions. According to Graves, the situations in which the characters repeatedly find themselves encompass "all the evils commonly found in war on a large scale—ambition, greed, cruelty, treachery, incompetence." The tale also demonstrates the qualities of friendship, loyalty, inventiveness, courage, and love.

Homer's story is twenty-seven hundred years old, but human nature remains unchanged. As the heroes of the tale discover, all actions have consequences, some predictable and some not. This story about men and women in the most trying circumstances encourages readers to ponder the human condition.

About the Author

Robert von Ranke Graves was born on July 24, 1895, in Wimbledon, England. His father, Alfred Perceval Graves, was both a poet and inspector of schools; his mother, Amalie, a descendant of the German historian Leopold von Ranke, cared for a family of ten children (five from Alfred's previous marriage). Graves's mother was forty and his father forty-seven when he was born.

In 1901, at the age of six, Graves was sent to Charterhouse, the first in a series of preparatory schools he would attend.

He enlisted in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers in 1914 and was severely wounded in the trench warfare of France. He wrote and published several collections of poetry before the end of the war, including *Over the Brazier* (1916), *Goliath and David* (1916), and *Fairies and Fusiliers* (1917).

In 1918 he married Nancy Nicholson, a painter and ardent feminist, with whom he had four children before they separated in 1929. Graves's autobiography, *Good-bye to All That*, (1929; 1957) recounts the events of his years in public school, his war experiences, something of his married life, his experiences at St. John's College, Oxford, and the single year he spent teaching at the University of Cairo in Egypt.

In 1929 Graves left England for Majorca, an island off the coast of Spain, where he resided for the rest of his life.

In his early years there he collaborated with Laura Riding, an American poet. He also wrote what would become his most famous novel, *I, Claudius* (1934), which won the Hawthorne and the James Tait Black Memorial prizes. He developed pervasive interests in mythology and poetry that resulted in two important books: *The White Goddess* (1948) and *The Greek Myths* (1955).

After World War II Graves returned to Majorca with Beryl Pritchard Hodge, who became his second wife in 1950.

Together they had four children. Graves continued his prolific output of novels, translations, and poetry. In 1961 he was appointed professor of poetry at Oxford University, but he continued to spend most of each year on Majorca. Despite his unorthodox and often iconoclastic views, he remained at least nominally attached to the Anglican faith and, upon his death on December 7, 1985, was buried in the graveyard of the Roman Catholic Church in the village of Deya, Majorca.

Setting

In his epic poems, Homer tells of ancient Greek and Trojan heroes who fought a war in the thirteenth century B.C. Most scholars today believe that such a war was actually fought in the Bronze Age, but the details were already steeped in myth and legend when Homer transcribed the events. Achilles and the other Greek heroes reflect the culture of Mycenaean society, a patriarchal and bellicose world in which only kings and princes were important enough to be preserved for history. The gods that are portrayed are immortal, more powerful than humans but just as flawed with weaknesses and desires.

The terrible Trojan War is instigated by a quarrel between three goddesses, and is then needlessly prolonged because of the bickering of two heroes. Helen, whose beauty inflames the combatants, is one of many women in the tale who become pawns of the rich and powerful.

Homer underscores the seeming futility of the war, while simultaneously glamorizing the exploits of its heroes.

Some of the characters lead tragic lives, while others are blessed with a measure of happiness to leaven their sorrows.

But pain and suffering are very much a part of the mortal life depicted by Homer.



Social Sensitivity

The characters in *The Siege and Fall of Troy* are similar in their human emotions and weaknesses to people today.

The society in which they live, however, is very different. Homer, who lived about the eighth century B.C., wrote about the Mycenaean culture that preceded his era by more than five hundred years.

This culture valued physical prowess, particularly in war, and had little regard for women, commoners, or slaves. Thus the story of the Trojan War is a tale of kings and princes, revered even though they often behave in a less than admirable fashion. Graves has done little to ennoble his mortal characters. In Homer's version, when Priam visits Achilles to beg for the body of his unburied son, Achilles is moved by Priam's resemblance to his own aged father and talks about the universal sorrow of life.

In Graves's version, Achilles is not sympathetic; instead, he is preoccupied with his infatuation for Priam's daughter.

Graves's portrayal of the behavior of the gods is also largely unflattering.

Homer's gods are not perfect but their actions, which parallel the actions of mortals, are often the occasion for irony and humor. Graves's gods, on the other hand, are capricious at best.

Literary Qualities

Although Graves retells the Iliad and the Odyssey, he chooses to ignore many of the conventions that govern those epics. In these epics, Homer had a narrowly focused view of his subjects. The Iliad, for example, is the story of the anger of Achilles, not that of the Trojan War. Readers must look elsewhere to learn about such things as the judgment of Paris, the Trojan horse, and Achilles' death. Graves worked from a large body of classical literature, assembling pieces of the legend and myth to suit the purposes of his story. Graves's stated purpose was "to make the whole story, from the foundation of Troy to the return of the victorious Greeks, into a single short book for boys and girls." The result is a fast-paced, comprehensive account, in a succinct, direct style, with many characterizations that deviate from Homer's portrayals.

Graves had a sober story to tell, the story of "the long, calamitous Trojan War, which benefited nobody." This circumstance makes the isolated examples of selfless courage or affection that sometimes brighten the story all the more ennobling.



Themes and Characters

The Siege and Fall of Troy begins ominously. Following the commands of an oracle, Prince Scamander of Crete founds his new city of Troy where "earthborn enemies should disarm his men under cover of darkness." In subsequent generations, King Laomedon cheats Apollo, Poseidon, and Aeacus out of the fees he promised them for their help in building the city's walls, and later swindles Heracles. This sets the stage for King Priam, who was warned to kill his son Paris at birth.

Ill-fated Paris makes a disastrous judgment that earns him one friend but two enemies who eventually cause the downfall of Priam's kingdom.

Because Homer begins his Iliad only in the last year of the Trojan War, much of Graves's material for these opening scenes is derived from other classical authors. He tells how Zeus chooses unfortunate Paris to decide who is most beautiful—Hera, Athene, or Aphrodite; how Helen's suitors swear to protect her from anyone who would seek to kidnap her; how the ruses to prevent Achilles and Odysseus from joining the war are circumvented; and how King Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter Iphigeneia to gain favorable winds for his fleet.

Agamemnon, greatest of the Achaian kings and leader of the Greek expedition, is one of the most fully drawn characters of the story. Ironically, he is a fretting, vacillating ruler who is, by turns, stubborn, foolish, and excessively proud. His feeble attempt to protect Iphigeneia fails. When the Trojans have fought his army to exhaustion, he suggests simply that they leave and return home. He selfishly refuses to return the beautiful Chryseis to her father, Apollo's priest, and invokes the wrath of that god. He demonstrates his excessive pride when he walks on the purple carpet spread out for him at his homecoming by his wife, who eventually becomes his murderer. Agamemnon is a very imperfect example of a hero, although no more imperfect than Zeus, the almighty king of the gods, who threatens his wife and is eventually duped by her.

The character of Achilles—almost unkillable except for a single vulnerable point—is more sympathetically portrayed. His mother Thetis tries to make him immortal by holding him by the heel and dipping him into the river Styx. She tries to keep him from going to war by disguising him as a woman, but he seizes a sword that was hidden in a chest and joins the Greek warriors.

When Agamemnon refuses to return Chryseis to end Apollo's plague, Achilles is the only one who protests. But when his honor has been stained, he sulks in his tent, refusing to take up arms again until the Greeks have suffered terribly for their insults. His beloved companion, Patroclus, instead dons Achilles' armor and is horribly slain in battle in his place. Achilles then goes to his fate, driven by wrath.

A third hero, Odysseus, is perhaps the most complex character of the tale. Odysseus is renowned in all ancient sources for his intellect and shrewdness, but in Graves's account, his shrewdness is depicted as pitiless cunning. His treachery leads to the



deaths of Palamedes and Ajax. He schemes to harm Philoctetes and Diomedes, and he throws Hector's infant son from the walls of Troy.

Graves's version of Odysseus's homecoming is derived from the most ancient of sources—he returns to find that Penelope has been unfaithful to him, and, after further troubles, he is mistakenly killed by his own son, Telemachus.

Homer's more heroic Odysseus seems a very different person from the plotter and schemer described by Graves.

Woven throughout the intricate plot is the scheming of the immortal gods and goddesses, who strive to manipulate the outcome of the war by playing favorites—offering protection to certain heroes while plotting to overthrow others. Mortal characters are shamelessly manipulated to do the will of the capricious deities.

Graves unifies these far-flung story elements by emphasizing two major themes. The first is the futility of war; no one gains from the immense bloodshed and suffering described in his story. The second theme underscores the complexity of the human condition.

None of the characters is completely good, none completely bad. All are forced to act, but none is given an easy or clear direction. Most suffer unforeseen tragic consequences for their decisions and actions. The story invites young readers to ask searching questions about human nature.



Topics for Discussion

1. Is Achilles responsible for what happens in his life? Are the gods responsible? Is fate responsible?
2. How are women portrayed in The Siege and Fall of Troy?
3. Hera nags and lies; Athene tricks Hector; Zeus calls Ares names. What kind of gods are these? How do they differ from the book's human characters?
4. How are common soldiers and slaves portrayed in this story?
5. Do you admire any of these characters?
6. Characters in this story play many tricks on one another, most with very serious consequences. List as many of these tricks as you can. Do the various characters in the story approve or disapprove of them? Do you?
7. The story contains numerous quarrels, the most important of which is between Achilles and Agamemnon.

What is the result of this quarrel? How is it finally resolved?

8. Compare the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon with other quarrels. What are the similarities and differences in the quarrels?
9. What do the characters in this story think about lying?
10. Do any of the characters change or grow because of their experiences?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. How does Achilles exemplify the Homeric ideal of a man as "a speaker of words and a doer of deeds"?

2. Nestor is the only one of the Greeks to return home to a happy situation.

Does this mean that he is the ideal hero?

3. Graves's characterization of Odysseus is complex. As Graves portrays him, is Odysseus resourceful or unscrupulous? Eloquent or sophisticated?

Long-suffering or the cause of suffering?

You may also wish to compare Graves's Odysseus to other pictures of the man, such as in canto 26 of Dante's *Inferno* or in Alfred Tennyson's poem "Ulysses."

4. Women in this story are queens, wives, and slaves. How is each of these situations materially different from the others?

5. What effect does the element of the supernatural have on the story? Would the outcome of the story be any different without the activity of the gods?



For Further Reference

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Related Titles/Adaptations

Graves published a translation of the complete Iliad in prose (with passages of poetry) under the title *The Anger of Achilles* (1959) before he published *The Siege and Fall of Troy*. In like manner, his *Greek Gods and Heroes*, written for young adults, was preceded by a two-volume work, *The Greek Myths*, which begins with creation stories and ends with Odysseus's wanderings, and follows each of the individual stories with supplementary material of historical and anthropological interest. In *Greek Gods and Heroes* he introduces the Olympian and minor deities.

None of Graves's sixteen novels were written for young readers, but many of them (with mature subject matter) have been read with pleasure by older secondary students. Two are particularly relevant to Greek myth. *The Golden Fleece* (1944; also published as *Hercules, My Shipmate*) tells the story of the Argonauts in a time before the patriarchal system of the Dorians replaced an earlier matriarchal society. *Homer's Daughter* (1955) is the story of Nausicaa, the young princess who finds Odysseus washed up on the shore. In Graves's novel she—not Homer—is the author of the *Odyssey*.

Older students with particular interest in antiquity would also be interested in Graves's most famous novel, *I, Claudius*, and its sequel, *Claudius the God and His Wife Messalina* (1934). The former was made into a British television series in 1976 and was broadcast in America on public television in 1978. Students interested in the theory behind Graves's mythic and poetic philosophy might read *The White Goddess*. Graves's *White Goddess* is both his muse and the mother goddess of the matriarchal religion that preceded the patriarchal cultures of Europe.



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