

The Walls of Windy Troy Short Guide

The Walls of Windy Troy by Marjorie Braymer

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Contents

The Walls of Windy Troy Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	9
Topics for Discussion.....	11
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	12
For Further Reference.....	13
Copyright Information.....	14

Overview

The Walls of Windy Troy, a biography of the German archeologist Heinrich Schliemann, has all the appeal of an old-fashioned novel in its description of a poor boy's rise to prominence as a result of hard work and keen intelligence. Braymer skillfully weaves together the fascinating archeological story of the discovery of the site of ancient Troy and the equally astonishing story of Schliemann's life. Schliemann's obsession with Troy, launched when he is only eight years old, provides young readers with an impressive example of determination. Not only does he have an early sense of his life's mission, but he is also patient enough to devote more than three decades to amassing the wealth necessary to achieve his goal. An amateur archeologist whose deductions about the site of Troy earn him the ridicule of the community of professional archeologists, Schliemann is an underdog figure who eventually proves triumphant over his doubters.

About the Author

Marjorie Elizabeth Braymer was born on March 21 , 1911, in Chicago, Illinois. From 1930 until 1940 she worked in New York City as an editor and manuscript reader for film companies. She then returned to the Midwest and in 1943 graduated from Ohio State University with a degree in education. In 1944 she returned to New York to obtain a master's degree from Columbia University Teachers College, and from 1960 to 1961 studied at Stanford University.

Braymer has lived in California ever since 1945, when she launched a twodecade teaching career at Sequoia High School in Redwood, California. She also worked as an editor for Addison Wesley Publishing Company in Palo Alto, California, between 1965 and 1967.

Braymer's writing has garnered many awards. She won the Vandewater Poetry Prize at Ohio State University in 1943, and in 1960 was honored with the New York Herald Tribune's Spring Book Festival Honor Book Award for *The Walls of Windy Troy*. This book was also chosen as an American Library Association Notable Book in 1960.

Setting

Heinrich Schliemann lived from 1822 to 1890, but *The Walls of Windy Troy* covers his early childhood only briefly, through use of flashback. The biography opens with Schliemann's visit to Hamburg at age nineteen in search of a job. The book follows him to Holland and eventually to St. Petersburg, Russia, where he becomes an established businessman. Schliemann moves to California in 1850 to clear up his late brother's estate and to capitalize on the booming gold-rush economy. After his return to Russia, the scene shifts in 1866 to Turkey, where Schliemann digs for the site of ancient Troy. He hypothesizes that the city lies near the village of Hissarlik, and succeeds in unearthing layer upon layer of settlements, dating back to the Bronze Age.

In 1874 Schliemann moves his operations to Mycenae in Greece, where he hunts for the tomb of the Greek warrior Agamemnon. An epilogue capsulizes the advances in archeological theory since the time of Schliemann's death and places his discoveries in the context of those that have followed.

Social Sensitivity

Schliemann's attitude toward the women in his life may prove offensive to some readers. A man obsessed with finding the original site of Troy, Schliemann is depicted as having a somewhat proprietary air toward women. Throughout his life, Schliemann set goals—the acquisition of language skills, the accumulation of wealth, the discovery of ancient tombs and cities—and almost invariably succeeded in his pursuits. Braymer portrays Schliemann's quest for a suitable wife as no different from his other quests. Schliemann's assumption that Minna will be his for the asking, despite their fourteen-year separation, points up the often self-centered nature of his thinking. Singleminded determination made Schliemann a great success in business and archeology, but initially less successful in his personal life.

At one point Braymer writes that Schliemann "could have had his choice of beautiful and eligible women in half a dozen countries, but the lesson in disillusion that he had learned from Catherine had taught him what he valued most highly in a wife." Although "what he valued," namely intellectual curiosity, is a positive trait, Braymer's phrasing reflects a certain level of conceit on Schliemann's part and almost dehumanizes the "eligible women."

When Schliemann finally forges a happy marriage with Sophie, she is depicted as always in her husband's shadow. According to Braymer, Sophie is happy to "cook the kind of food he liked." An intelligent woman, Sophie nonetheless assumes a stereotypically docile role in the partnership: "Sophie did not write.

She had babies...She read Greek to him.

She listened." Braymer never questions Sophie's dedication; this bias in the narrative in many ways reflects the inequalities inherent in many nineteenth-century marriages, but readers may wonder whether a woman of Sophie's intelligence was truly as satisfied with her subservient role as Braymer depicts her.

The two primary sites that Schliemann excavates—Troy and Mycenae—hold great importance in the history of Western civilization. In general, *The Walls of Windy Troy* fosters an appreciation of the magnificence and lasting impact of ancient Greek culture, but it is worth noting that in one instance Braymer allows a note of condescension toward non-European cultures to enter her narrative. Speaking of Schliemann's visit to Panama City, prior to his excavations of Troy, she writes, "He allowed himself to wonder how long it would be before he could start his search for a ruined city incalculably more important and imposing than this one."

Literary Qualities

The Walls of Windy Troy is carried along smoothly by a sequence of highly dramatic scenes, well imagined and well presented: the young Schliemann encountering the student who recites Greek, appealing to Wendt for help, being shipwrecked, and working his way up the business ladder in Amsterdam; the adult Schliemann traveling to California, learning that his goods have survived a devastating fire in the Black Sea port of Memel, and discovering ruins at Hissarlik and Mycenae. The biography resembles a Victorian story of great expectations completely fulfilled, although not necessarily within the lifetime of its protagonist. Braymer avoids painting an overly rosy picture of Schliemann's career as an amateur archeologist, acknowledging that at the time of his death he still faced heavy criticism from scholars who deemed his conclusions rash and unfounded.

Braymer writes that "[Schliemann] went too fast and he destroyed some evidence that it would be useful to have. He rushed into print with theories that could not be proved." A century after his death, Schliemann is regarded as a pioneer of modern archeology, but Braymer's incorporation of critical commentary makes *The Walls of Windy Troy* a balanced and thought-provoking biography for young adults.

An appealing literary feature of *The Walls of Windy Troy* is Braymer's effective use of epigraphs. Each of the twenty chapters begins with a quotation well chosen to foreshadow the theme of the chapter. Chapter 1, for instance, opens with Athena's remark to Telemachus in book II of the *Odyssey*: "That journey you have wanted so much to make will not be postponed any longer. For I am such a good friend of your father that I shall furnish you with a swift ship." And in the narrative that follows, the ship broker Wendt—an old friend of Schliemann's father—arranges for passage to Venezuela on the brig *Dorothea*.

Appropriately, all the epigraphs are drawn from Homer's chronicles of the Trojan war and its aftermath, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The introduction to chapter 15 is from Virgil's *Aeneid*, another epic work about a survivor of this great conflict.

The Walls of Windy Troy is structured symmetrically around its twenty chapters. The first ten chapters follow Schliemann's life before he goes to Troy.

This section of the book ends with the great fire on the docks at Memel; Schliemann makes a fortune because his goods are miraculously spared when those of every other merchant are consumed by flames. Chapter 11 introduces the second half of the story and opens with Schliemann in Greece, "standing in the strong sunlight of Ithaca," home of the Greek hero Odysseus. Chapter 20 closes with Schliemann's burial and is followed by an epilogue that evaluates Schliemann's contributions to archeology. Thus the first half of the book treats Schliemann's long years of amassing the wealth needed for his undertaking, while the second half relates how he applies his funds toward his excavations at Mycenae and Hissarlik. Overall, the book is clearly written and

dynamically presented. Although not a prerequisite for reading the book, a familiarity with the events of the Trojan War will enhance a reader's enjoyment of the biography.



Themes and Characters

Heinrich Schliemann is the only character of significance in *The Waffs of Windy Troy*. When he is nine years old, his mother dies; meanwhile, his father, a minister, becomes implicated in a murky scandal concerning misappropriation of church funds. With his mother dead and his father preoccupied, Schliemann is sent to live with his uncle, the pastor Friederich Schliemann of Kalkhorst. But when Schliemann turns fourteen, the pastor concludes that his nephew has had enough schooling. Schliemann becomes a grocer's apprentice in Furstenberg, a small village about a hundred and fifty miles from Hamburg, where he works for five years until a barrel falls on his chest, damaging his lungs. Let go by the grocer, Schliemann journeys to Hamburg and books passage on a ship to Venezuela. When the ship runs aground off the Dutch island of Texel, the nineteen-year-old Schliemann is left destitute, but instead of returning to Hamburg he moves to Amsterdam and launches the business career that eventually makes him one of the wealthiest men in Europe.

Schliemann's most impressive traits are his diligence, his quick mind, and his remarkable imagination. Introduced to Homer's tales of the Trojan War as a young child, Schliemann decides to prove what most scholars doubt: that Troy was an actual city and not just a mythical spot conjured up by poets of old. One of the most amazing—and inspiring—of Schliemann's traits is his facility in learning foreign languages.

Spanish, English, Dutch, Russian, Greek, Turkish, and other languages become part of the intellectual armament with which Schliemann attacks the worlds of commerce and archeology.

Schliemann apparently never succumbs to sloth, nor does he ever reveal any inclination to squander the money he makes on luxury items. Had he not been correct in his intuitions about Troy, he would appear today as he did to many of his contemporaries—a clever eccentric victimized by his monomania.

Of all the stumbling blocks in Schliemann's life, it is his personal life that at first troubles him the most. He works hard to make his fortune, sustained by the thought that someday he will marry Minna, a childhood friend with whom he once shared the dream of finding Troy. But when in 1848, at the age of twenty-six, he finally feels capable of supporting a wife and writes a letter of proposal to Minna, he learns that she has married someone else. It seems typical of Schliemann's singlemindedness that he could go for so long assuming so much about a woman whom he has not contacted in years. Gradually reconciled to life without Minna, he Photograph of Heinrich Schliemann reprinted by permission of F. A. Brockhaus Verlag for *The Walls of Windy Troy* by Marjorie Braymer. Harcourt, Brace and World: New York (1960).

decides in 1852 to marry Catherine Lyschin, a native of St. Petersburg.



Catherine proves more interested in clothing and fashion than in traipsing around the Turkish countryside digging up potsherds, and as a result, the couple is divorced in 1869. Less than a year later, Schliemann marries seventeen-year-old Sophie Engastromenos, a quiet, learned Greek woman who becomes his companion in all of his enterprises. Schliemann courts Sophie by quizzing her on her knowledge of Homer; it is her fluent recital of Homeric verse that wins his heart. Thus Schliemann's final choice of a wife proves contingent on her compatibility with his obsession.

Braymer does not develop many of the book's secondary characters in great depth. Neither Minna nor Catherine receives more than a passing reference, and Sophie never comes to life on the page. A few vignettes cast light on minor characters: Wendt, a ship broker in Hamburg, is depicted as a kindly person who goes out of his way to help Schliemann; Hermann Niederhoffer, a drunken student, recites the Iliad in classical Greek and fires young Schliemann with a desire to learn the language of Homer; and Simonsen, captain of the Venezuela-bound ship that capsizes off the coast of Holland, treats his destitute young passenger in a friendly way. But these people appear briefly and then disappear, always leaving Schliemann alone on center stage.



Topics for Discussion

1. Although Schliemann is a remarkably capable and self-sufficient person, he sometimes benefits from good luck and the kindness of strangers.

Explain the role of good luck in his life.

What help does he get from others?

2. What are the crucial events in young Schliemann's life that motivate him to devote his life to the discovery of the site of ancient Troy?

3. Summarize Schliemann's experience in Russia. Why does he go there in the first place? What are the most important events of his life in Russia?

4. Why does Schliemann go to America? Is he successful there? Describe his experience in California.

5. How do Minna, Catherine, and Sophie in turn influence Schliemann's career? What is Sophie's value to him as a colleague?

6. Why does Schliemann shift his excavations from Hissarlik to Mycenae?

What does he hope to find in Mycenae?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Find out when the Trojan War was fought and who fought it. What are the major sources of our information on Troy? What are some of the theories concerning Homer's authorship of the Iliad and the Odyssey?
2. After reading the epilogue, evaluate the success of Schliemann's research. In what ways was he wrong in interpreting what he found and in what respects right? In what ways have his discoveries influenced the course of archeology over the last century?
3. Write an essay about Schliemann's most important character traits and how they helped him to succeed.
4. Read Agamemnon, a play by the Greek dramatist Aeschylus, and evaluate Schliemann's discoveries at Mycenae in the light of this hero's role in Greek history.
5. How would you describe Schliemann's approach to learning a new language? Could his methods be readily incorporated into schoolroom teaching?

Pretend that you are a language teacher whose job it is to teach English to young students, and draw up a study guide along the lines of Schliemann's methods.

For Further Reference

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Contains two fascinating chapters on Schliemann's efforts at Troy and Mycenae.

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