

Agamemnon Summary

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Background

Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* is one of the greatest works of ancient Greek tragedy. It was written in the 5th century BCE and was first performed in 458 BCE at the City Dionysia festival in Athens. The play is the first part of the *Oresteia* Trilogy, which presents the continuing story of blood curses and revenge in the House of Atreus. The background of *Agamemnon* is set against the victory in the Trojan War and its aftermath. After ten years of war, King Agamemnon returns home victorious, but the curse on his family and the sins of his past close in on him. His wife, Clytemnestra, plots revenge for the sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia. Thus, although the king returns as a victor, the tragedy is fulfilled through his death.

The play is not only the story of one man's downfall but also a reflection of justice, fate, and divine intervention in Greek society. The Chorus serves as the voice of the people, interpreting the consequences of the royal family's actions and drawing moral lessons. It demonstrates that human pride and sin are never forgivable under divine law. Characters like Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Cassandra, and the Chorus hold symbolic significance. King Agamemnon represents arrogance and guilt, while Clytemnestra embodies revenge and the terrifying face of justice. The play illustrates how family curses and cycles of vengeance shape Greek tragedy. *Agamemnon* is not merely the story of a royal murder but also a reflection of the moral values, religious beliefs, and tragic philosophy of human life in ancient Greek society. For this reason, it is regarded as a foundational play of Western tragedy.

Summary

Clytemnestra's Waiting and the Greeks' Victory

Agamemnon is the king of the Greek city of Argos, and his wife is Clytemnestra. From the roof of the royal palace in Argos, a Watchman waits for the signal of the Greeks' victory over Troy. In fact, from Argos to Troy, watchers had been placed on different mountain tops by Clytemnestra's order. According to the plan, if Troy fell, the watchman on the nearest mountain to Troy would light a fire. In this way, one beacon fire would pass the signal to the next, until finally the Watchman in Argos would see it and convey the good news to the queen. This was actually Clytemnestra's plan through a "beacon fire chain." The Watchman in Argos sees the

signal fire, confirming the Greeks' victory. He then says it is now his duty to inform the queen. Clytemnestra has been waiting for this victory for ten long years.

Clytemnestra's Conversation with the Chorus and the Confirmation of Troy's Defeat:

After this, the Chorus enters and recalls the prophecy of Calchas, the Greek prophet. Calchas had predicted that the Greeks would win the war against Troy. He had also foretold how the goddess Artemis forced Agamemnon to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia. Artemis is the Goddess of the Hunt, Chastity, and Childbirth. When Agamemnon was setting out for the war against Troy, he found that the winds were not favorable.

The reason was that Agamemnon had once killed a deer during a hunt and arrogantly boasted that he was a better hunter than Artemis herself. This arrogance (hubris) was considered an insult to the goddess. In anger, Artemis blocked the winds, preventing the fleet from sailing. To appease Artemis and gain favorable winds, Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter.

Clytemnestra continues to wait for the news of victory. She tells the Chorus that the Greek army has indeed defeated Troy. The queen then explains in detail how the message of Troy's fall traveled from Troy to Argos through the chain of beacon fires. She lists each mountain, describing how the fire passed step by step: Ida → Lemnos → Athos → Macistus → Messapion → Cithaeron → Aegiplanctus → Argos.

At first, the Chorus is doubtful, thinking perhaps the news has come too hastily. But after hearing the queen's detailed account, they agree that the information is truly reliable. Then the Chorus reflects on the destructive cause of Troy's defeat, saying that it was all because of Paris and Helen. They place the blame on Paris and Helen, and in their discussion, they begin to believe that Clytemnestra's news of Troy's fall is indeed accurate. At that moment, a Herald arrives and confirms that Troy has been defeated.

Agamemnon's Return to Argos: Clytemnestra decides to hold a grand celebration for the Greek victory. She wishes to welcome her husband, Agamemnon, with honor for his bravery. After this, the Chorus recalls the story of Helen and Paris. They ask the Herald about Menelaus. The Herald replies that Menelaus has been lost at sea; due to a storm, he and some of his soldiers were separated and vanished.

Agamemnon, however, arrives safely in Argos, bringing with him Cassandra, the most beautiful daughter of King Priam of Troy. Agamemnon thanks the gods for protecting him in the war. He also announces that he will summon an assembly in Argos to give thanks to the gods and to decide on matters of state governance.

Clytemnestra warmly welcomes him. She also greets Cassandra. Then Clytemnestra orders a purple (red) carpet to be spread out for Agamemnon. Agamemnon resists, saying such honor belongs only to the gods, not to him. But Clytemnestra repeatedly insists and persuades him. Finally, Agamemnon walks across the purple carpet and enters the palace.

The Prophecy of Agamemnon's Murder: Cassandra then prophesies that something terrible is about to happen. She tells this to the Chorus, but no one believes her, due to the curse of the god Apollo. Cassandra had been granted the gift of prophecy, but since she rejected Apollo's love, he cursed her so that no one would ever believe her predictions.

Meanwhile, the Chorus itself senses that some evil fate awaits Agamemnon. They recall that he committed a sin by walking on the purple carpet. They add that excessive pride (hubris) always provokes the wrath of the gods, and therefore divine justice must be fulfilled.

Clytemnestra and the Chorus urge Cassandra to enter the palace, but she refuses. Angered, Clytemnestra leaves the place. Cassandra then cries out that both she and Agamemnon will be murdered. She tells the Chorus that the killer will be a woman, most likely Clytemnestra herself. Still, the Chorus refuses to believe her. Cassandra, in despair, accepts her fate. The Chorus continues to discuss Cassandra's prophecy.

The Murder of Agamemnon: Suddenly, the Chorus hears the cries of Agamemnon. Both Agamemnon and Cassandra are killed. The Chorus declares that whoever murdered Agamemnon and Cassandra will now take control of Argos. Then the main doors of the palace open, and Clytemnestra appears with bloodstained hands. She announces that Agamemnon had killed their daughter Iphigenia, and for that reason, she has taken revenge. She also says she killed Cassandra because Cassandra was Agamemnon's mistress. The Chorus mourns the death of Agamemnon.

Aegisthus's Role in Agamemnon's Murder and His Reason: After this, Aegisthus (Agamemnon's cousin), who is also Clytemnestra's lover, enters. He reveals that he helped Clytemnestra kill Agamemnon. He explains further that his motive was also rooted in family conflict. Long ago, Agamemnon's father, Atreus, had deceived Aegisthus' father, Thyestes. Atreus tricked Thyestes by serving him the flesh of his own children and then drove him into exile. With Aegisthus at his side, Thyestes left Argos. Before leaving, Thyestes cursed Atreus, declaring that no member of his family would ever die peacefully. From this curse began the chain of hereditary guilt.

Aegisthus angrily orders the Chorus to serve him, but they insult him instead. They say they would rather die than obey him. The Chorus also foretells that Agamemnon's exiled son,

Orestes, will one day return to avenge his father's murder. The play ends with Clytemnestra and Aegisthus ruling Argos. Guards begin to watch over the palace gates, while the Chorus slowly leaves the royal house.

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