

AGAMEMNON

Heroic Imagination Stories Series

Rose Zimbardo

The most important thing to remember is that heroes are not necessarily morally good. Macbeth, for example, is great, heroic and evil.

Aeschylus, the *Agamemnon*

There are two heroes in this tragedy: Agamemnon and Clytemnestra

The *Agamemnon* is the paradigmatic Ancient Greek tragedy. Agamemnon faces “the tragic choice,” which, as Nietzsche says is the choice between two laws “each of which is just and unjust and justified in both.” He must choose between kingship and kinship. When the mighty army of 1000 men he has gathered is becalmed at Aulis, Agamemnon is told by the priest-seer that the goddess Artemis demands that Agamemnon sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, before the goddess will lift her binding curse and allow the ships to sail to Troy. The soldiers are stricken with fever and multitudes of them are dying. In order to keep his “faith in battle,” i.e., his fealty to his soldiers, his “kingship” Agamemnon must violate his faith as a father. Iphigenia has been “the clear beauty of [his] house.” To keep his faith in battle Agamemnon must shed the closest kindred blood. Agamemnon must make a no-choice choice, for whichever way he chooses he will have violated a law.



After he has obliterated Troy, letting loose “the Beast of Argos” to destroy the Trojan people, their shrines and even their soil, for he has planted salt in the ground to prevent its cultivation, Agamemnon returns in triumph to Argos. The wily Clytemnestra greets him with praises and also seduces him into walking on the costly crimson carpet. When he has entered the house and is bathing, Clytemnestra catches Agamemnon in a winding net of garments and kills him. His death constitutes Agamemnon’s fall.



Clytemnestra's fall is psychological. When the play begins Clytemnestra stands tall way above the Chorus. She has nothing but contempt for them, for she is more intelligent and strong willed than they. She announces that Troy has fallen. The Chorus cannot believe that it has and thinks she is dreaming. She demonstrates her superior intelligence by describing the beacon system she invented which, beacon fire by beacon fire, spans the immense distance between Argos and Troy and brings the news in a single night.

Right after she has murdered her husband, saying, "That man is Agamemnon. He is dead. Struck down by this right hand in righteousness," as she still stands tall above the dithering chorus, Clytemnestra step by step falls to the level of the Chorus. For the first time she feels the need to explain herself to them. First step: I killed him because he killed my daughter. Second step: I killed him because he brought home a mistress—Cassandra of Troy--whom I also killed. Third step: The sight of their dead and bleeding bodies will give me an added sexual thrill when I go to bed with Aegisthus tonight. Fourth step: It was the Curse on the House of Atreus that killed Agamemnon. Last step: How can you say I did this? The Furies did it. And finally, if you keep complaining about the murder, we, Aegisthus and I, will send you as slaves to the rowing benches.



The brilliance and economy of this design twice enforces the tragic truth: "He who is great shall be as if he never were." In tragedy, then, a hero is one who rises in greatness to stand tall above ordinary people, but because his rise to glory depends upon the strength he draws from "the rich herds of the people," (the soldiers who die to make him great as a general, for instance) he must fall before the force exerted upon him by the will of the tribe.

Learning Assignment for the Agamemnon Essay

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Write a two-page essay: Reflect on Agamemnon's journey as a hero and explore parallels between Agamemnon's rise and fall with contemporary politicians and other famous people. How has the people who raised the person to a pedestal of fame participated in her/his fall?

