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AGAMEMNON

Central Quote:

PRE-GRAMMAR | Preparation

*Prepare the student for understanding the Central One Idea
by drawing upon his or her prior knowledge or experience.*

1. Imagine you have been tricked and hurt by someone close to you. How might you be tempted to respond?

2. Recall a time when you have gotten even with someone who did something bad to you. What reasons did you have for paying the person back?

GRAMMAR | Presentation

The student is presented with and discovers essential facts, elements, and features of the play.

READING NOTES

1. **Atreus** (41.4) – father of Agamemnon and Menelaus; brother of Thyestes, whose children he killed and served as a meal to Thyestes.
2. **how changed this house is now** (42.6) – The house of Atreus has a sordid past. Its founder, Tantalus, was a mortal son of Zeus who often dined with the gods, but one day he decided to murder his son and guilefully serve the flesh to the gods. The gods, however, perceived what the food was before they ate, and they punished Tantalus. The gods revived his son, Pelops, who remained an honorable man for the rest of his life. Pelops' two sons, Atreus and Thyestes, followed Tantalus's example rather than Pelops'. Likewise, Atreus's son Agamemnon killed his own daughter and offered her as a sacrifice. And so the curse on this family that Tantalus began continues to haunt it.
3. **Ilion** (42.15) – the city of Troy.
4. **Hellas** (43.5) – Greece.
5. **Priam** (43.6) – King of Troy; father of Hector, Paris, and Cassandra; killed upon an altar of Zeus.
6. **Fury** (43.18) – a goddess who pursued sinners, especially those guilty of killing blood-related kin.
7. **Paris** (43.20) – son of Priam; while a guest of Menelaus in Greece, he stole Menelaus' wife, Helen, and brought her back with him to Troy, instigating the Trojan War.
8. **Zeus, witness between guest and host** (43.21) – Zeus was the patron of hospitality, and he avenged any wrong done by either host or guest. The guest-host relationship is a recurring theme.
9. **Daughter of Tyndareos** (44.20) – Tyndareos was a king of Sparta and husband to Leda, the mother of Clytemnestra and Helen. Leda bore these daughters by Zeus, who appeared to her as a swan. Helen was so beautiful that many suitors sought her, including Odysseus, Ajax, Menelaus, and Agamemnon. Helen chose Menelaus, and Agamemnon wedded Clytemnestra. While Helen is often called "daughter of Zeus" because of her goddess-like beauty, Clytemnestra is not named with reference to Zeus, but to Tyndareos, perhaps because she is more like a queen than a goddess.¹
10. **Artemis** (46.15) – goddess daughter of Leto and Zeus, and sister of Apollo; she was the patron of wild animals and avenged the death of those sacred to her, such as a pregnant hare. Since Agamemnon sought to destroy Troy, which was like a hare that had not yet birthed her litter, Artemis sent a wind that kept the Greek ships from sailing out of port. To appease her, Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter, Iphigenia.
11. **Fate** (47.14) – The idea of fate occurs often in this play. It is the idea that people's lives are ultimately predetermined. Greek mythology personified this idea in the three Fates, who were goddesses that decided every person's destiny. In *Agamemnon*, it often seems that when the characters make life-altering decisions, they are acting according to fate rather than free will.

1. See Vellacott's discussion on p. 13.

WORDS TO BE DEFINED

Definitions Bank

appeasement	dutiful	lustfulness	stubborn group of people
bad temper	excessively supplied	obscure	timidity
a bride's gift to her groom	foreboding	prophet	to totally destroy
crafty deception	a funeral song	to punish	unappeasable
to detest utterly	a great flood	shameless boldness	wine poured out for a god
	like a vicious dog	a signal fire	

1. I long to see [...] the **beacon**-flare to speak from Troy and utter one word, 'Victory!' (41.8)
_____ a signal fire _____
2. In vain shall Priam's altars burn, his rich **libations** vainly flow (44.4)
_____ wine poured out for a god _____
3. The army's learned **Seer** saw this (46.1) _____ prophet _____
4. Bless the sign we saw today! Cancel all its **presaged** ill (47.2) _____ foreboding _____
5. And took to Troy as **dowry** destruction, blood, and tears (57.11) _____ a bride's gift to her groom _____
6. scar and subdue her fields, and from her fair soil **extirpate** her seed (61.19)
_____ to totally destroy _____
7. To enemies **implacable** (64.6) _____ unappeasable _____
8. Some god, by **guile** or intercession, saved our lives (65.25) _____ crafty deception _____
9. licked royal blood till lust was **surfeited** (71.11) _____ excessively supplied _____
10. With time dies **diffidence** (72.7) _____ timidity _____
11. What can one make of prophecy so **recondite**? (81.10) _____ obscure _____
12. Yet no **propitiation** could save her sons from dying (83.17) _____ appeasement _____
13. Met by the fawning tongue, the bright **obsequious** ear (85.9) _____ dutiful _____

14. Yet one word more, a prophecy – or, if a **dirge** (88.14) _____ a funeral song _____
15. The brute **effrontery** of your speech amazes us (91.14) _____ shameless boldness _____
16. Argos will **execrate** your nameless murder (91.25) _____ to detest utterly _____
17. Now you righteously **mulct** me with banishment (91.29) _____ to punish _____
18. His faithful soothsayer, who shared his berth, and knew sailors' **lasciviousness** (92.29)
_____ lustfulness _____
19. Nor turn your **spleen** on Helen (93.20) _____ bad temper _____
20. The light rain slacks – the **deluge** is in store (96.2) _____ a great flood _____
21. The **refractory** shall not be fed fat like show-horses (99.14) _____ stubborn group of people _____
22. Pay no heed to this **currish** howling (100.19) _____ like a vicious dog _____

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the story begin, and what does the watchman say he will not speak about?

A watchman on the roof of Atreus's palace longs to hear news of the war against Troy, and he is rewarded with the first sighting of beacon lights that signify the war is won. He calls for someone to tell the Queen the news. He hopes King Agamemnon returns safely. He refuses to speak about the house's story and how it has lost its former splendor.

2. When the elders describe what precipitated the war against Troy, they liken Agamemnon and Menelaus to eagles. Clytemnestra continues this analogy but adds that the eagles went to slaughter a pregnant hare, or Troy and all her people (45-46). Who abominates the eagles' feast and seeks to stop it from happening? According to Calchas's prayer (47.1-21), what chain reaction will follow?

Artemis, Apollo's sister, hates the eagles' feast. In order to hinder Agamemnon and Menelaus, Artemis sends a wind to keep the Greek ships from sailing to Troy. She will only relent if a sacrifice is made, but this sacrifice will build **"a tower of hate"** and **"anger still unreconciled poisoning a house's life with darkness, treachery and strife."**

3. Beginning at 48.30, Clytemnestra tells how Agamemnon killed their daughter, Iphigenia. What was Agamemnon's motivation for killing Iphigenia?

He killed her in order to **"help a war fought for a faithless wife and pay the ransom for a storm-bound fleet"** (50.13-14). Clytemnestra describes this motive as **"shameless self-willed infatuation"** (50.7).

4. Near the end of the play, find the line spoken by the elders that mirrors these words of Clytemnestra: **"The scale of Justice falls in equity: the killer will be killed"** (51.12-13).

"This maxim holds on earth: the sinner dies" (96.32).

5. The elders ask how Clytemnestra knows that the war has been won (52). Briefly state how the message was sent to her.

A series of beacon fires were lit, starting at Ida near Troy and ending at Arachnaeus, which the watchman on the palace saw and reported.

6. According to the elders, Troy was caught in a **"net"** laid by Zeus (55.12). What law did Troy break that led to being caught in **"grim annihilation's deadly mesh"** (55.16)?

They broke the law of hosts and guests when Paris came as a guest of Menelaus, seduced his wife Helen, and took her to Troy.

LOGIC | Dialectic

The student reasons with the facts, elements, and features of the play, and begins to uncover and determine the Central One Idea.

SOCRATIC DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How does the curse on Atreus's house begin with treachery? How does Agamemnon continue it?
Tantalus tried to trick the gods into eating the cooked flesh of his son at a banquet. Agamemnon sacrifices his own daughter to the gods. Both Tantalus and Agamemnon used treachery, killed their own kin, and made an unnatural offering to the gods. (Both were probably also driven by pride.)

2. What motivates Aegisthus to conspire against Agamemnon? Is he justified?
Thyestes, Aegisthus' father, was exiled by his brother Atreus. Thyestes was later invited back by Atreus to a banquet and was treacherously served the cooked flesh of his children. Since Atreus was Agamemnon's father, Aegisthus says that Agamemnon "**pays his blood in full atonement for his father's treacherous crime**" (97.18-19). [Answers may vary about whether Aegisthus was justified, but a biblical perspective would cite the fact that God does not count the sins of fathers against the sons (Ezekiel 18:19-20).]

RHETORIC | Expression

The student explains in his or her own words the Central One Idea with supporting details.

1 CENTRAL ONE IDEA

1. In a few sentences, briefly **summarize** the **plot** of *Agamemnon*.

King Agamemnon returns from the Trojan War to Argos. Among his spoils is Cassandra, Priam's daughter. Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra, has secretly conspired with her paramour, Aegisthus, to kill Agamemnon. Cassandra foresees that she and he both will be murdered. This happens, and when Argos' elders protest, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus subdue them and begin to rule Argos.

2. Write the **Central One Idea** of *Agamemnon* in a complete sentence:

3. List three or four points that support your determination of the Central One Idea.

Answers will vary. These points support the Teacher's Central One Idea:

- Agamemnon is portrayed as a sinner: He sacrificed his own daughter for the sake of a war, he plundered Troy savagely and impiously, and his pride outweighs his wisdom.
 - As a sinner, Agamemnon is worthy of death, as the elders affirm: ***"This maxim holds on earth: the sinner dies"*** (96.32).
 - Clytemnestra claims over and over to be serving justice on Agamemnon, acting as the representative of the Furies, but her treachery warrants its own retribution, as the elders argue: ***"Who will, who could absolve you?"*** (95.1). As Agamemnon's fate was prophesied, so is hers by Cassandra: ***"A third shall come to raise our cause, a son resolved to kill his mother, honouring his father's blood"*** (87.2-3).
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4. Choose a quote from *Agamemnon* that you think best embodies the Central One Idea – and with good penmanship, write it in the Central Quote section at the beginning of this lesson.

1 CENTRAL ONE IDEA (as expressed by the teacher)

COI - Particular:

Clytemnestra claims to fulfill justice by murdering her husband, Agamemnon, because he killed their daughter, Iphigenia, but she has made herself culpable and liable to future retribution.

COI - Abstract:

A person who claims to fulfill justice by returning evil for evil may bring future judgment upon herself.

ESSAY OPTION

Choose a topic below and respond with a 3-5 paragraph essay that includes an Introduction with a clear thesis; a Body with organized, logical, and specific support of the thesis; and a Conclusion with an amplification of the thesis/support.

The essay should feature appropriate tone, voice, and point of view; correct grammar, usage, and mechanics; a variety of sentence structures enhanced by subordination and parallelism; a balance of general and specific detail; and enhanced rhetorical effect through transition words, appropriate diction, strong verbs, descriptive adjectives, and other rhetorical devices.

1. Write an essay in which you analyze King Agamemnon. Your essay should have a clear thesis that lists the two, three, or four aspects of Agamemnon that will comprise the body of your essay.
2. Write an essay in which you describe the general attributes of Justice and the specific ways that Justice is portrayed in *Agamemnon*.
3. [Central One Idea] Use the Central One Idea of *Agamemnon* as the thesis, and support it with some evidence from your reading of the play and/or your work in the Study Guide.
4. [Open] Write an essay in which you analyze an aspect of *Agamemnon* that is of import to you, such as a particular theme, character, setting, element of plot, dialogue, symbol, or other literary or rhetorical motif.
5. [Teacher] Essay prompt:
