

Advanced Placement in  
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

**Medea**

by Euripides

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**Prestwick House**

Item No. 303752

# Medea

## Objectives

*By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to*

1. evaluate a Greek Tragedy with consideration of its historic context and the theatrical conventions of Ancient Greece.
2. analyze the characterization and motivations of the protagonist according to the definition of a tragic figure.
3. discuss the dramatic development of the play in terms of prologue, *parados*, *episode*, *stasimon*, *kommos*, and *exodos*.
4. examine the use of verbal and dramatic irony in the play.
5. explore how pathos and other techniques Euripides uses evoke emotions in the audience.
6. analyze feminist and anti-classicist themes in the work.
7. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
8. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
9. offer a close reading of *Medea* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the play.

## Background Lecture

### THE HISTORY OF GREEK THEATER

Greek theater originated from a cult festival in honor of Dionysus, the god of agriculture and wine. The rituals took place in the countryside, and female members of the cult, in a state of frenzy and ecstasy, ran through the wilderness. The women were called *maenads*, and in their ritual madness, it is believed that they would catch wild animals, tear their bodies apart (*sparagmos*), and eat the creatures' raw flesh (*omophagia*).

The festival evolved into the *City Dionysia*, a more civilized observance of the ritual that was held in Athens, and was believed to have been created by Pisistratus in 600 BC. In the *City Dionysia*, an *archon* was elected to organize the festival, and he chose two *paredroi* and ten *epimeletai* to assist him. The festival would begin with the *pompe*, in which the people of Athens went to the Acropolis and paraded the statue of Dionysus to the theater. Later, the *choregoi*, costumed members of the procession, would host a contest of *dithyrambs*, songs dedicated to Dionysus.

On the following day, the three competing playwrights would announce what plays they were going to perform in the competition. Each playwright was required to prepare three tragedies and one satyr play. A day would be given to each playwright to present his plays, and at the end of the festival, the judges (*agonthetai*) would select a winner.

### THE TRAGIC FIGURE

In Greek Theater, all tragedies focus on a tragic figure, a person who is moral and good, respects and follows social custom, and is a realistic character instead of an ideal. Most importantly, the character suffers from a tragic flaw, or *hamartia*, an imperfect quality or perception that leads to the person's downfall. Tragic figures are generally ignorant of their faults, and even though their lives are manipulated by fate and destiny, their *hamartia* is greatly responsible for the consequences of their actions and their suffering.

The most common form of *hamartia* is *hubris*, excessive pride. The tragic figure recognizes his or her flaw in a moment of *agnorisis*, but, at that point in the play, he or she cannot undo the catastrophes that have occurred or are imminent. The audience identifies with the tragic figures, living vicariously through them and experiencing their emotional trauma. At the completion of the play, the audience undergoes *catharsis*, a purging of feelings through empathy that results in relief from emotional tension.

In *Medea*, the title character is the tragic figure, and her flaw is her passion, manifest in both love and hate. Before the play begins, Medea's love for Jason motivates her to help him acquire the Golden Fleece, and, in effect, it leads to her being chased from Corinth and to the murder of her brother. In the form of hate and wrath, Medea's passion leads to the butchery of Pelias, as well as the murders of the princess, Creon, and Medea's own sons. While Medea has no *agnorisis* and remains a fairly static character throughout the play, she suffers greatly because of her flaw.

# Medea

1. What is the purpose of the opening monologue? What important background information does it present?

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2. Why might Euripides have had the Nurse open the play?

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3. How does the Nurse's speech utilize foreshadowing and to what effect?

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4. What is the purpose of the exchange between the Nurse and the Tutor?

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5. What universal truth about human motivation does the Tutor state? How does it explain Jason's actions?

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11. How does Euripides evoke sympathy for Medea in the passage beginning with “Women of Corinth” and ending with “my husband, has turned out to be the worst of men?”

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12. According to Medea, why are women the “most wretched creatures”?

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13. How is giving birth compared to going into battle?

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14. What does the analogy between childbirth and war reveal about Medea’s character?

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15. Why does Creon want to exile Medea and her children from Corinth?

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16. How does Medea argue that cleverness is a curse?

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29. How is the motif of marriage and family illustrated in the conversation between Medea and Aegeus?

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30. How do Aegeus and Medea respond to their marital problems differently? What does this reveal about their characters?

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31. What did the Oracle of Delphi prophesy to Aegeus?

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32. How does Euripides utilize foreshadowing in the conversation between Aegeus and Medea?

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33. What is Medea's motive for murdering her children, and how does this motive help provide deep, psychological insight into her character?

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34. How is Athens described, and how does the description enhance the text?

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41. In what ways does Euripides use vivid imagery to evoke pathos in the passage beginning with “O children, children, this is your city...” and ending with “the cause of the greatest grief for mortals”?

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42. In the same monologue, how does Euripides illustrate Medea’s inner conflict? For what purpose is her inner conflict exposed?

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43. What does the Chorus say is “the worst evil of all for humanity?”

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44. How does the choral ode make Medea’s planned actions seem more despicable?

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45. What sort of relationship does the text reveal the servants had with Medea and Jason?

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46. How does Euripides characterize the princess?

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