

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Medea

by Euripides

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Notes

I. Euripides

The fifth century B.C., a most important period of Greek drama, was the time in which the famous Greek dramatists Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides wrote. Euripides, born about 480 B.C., began to write in his early twenties and began competing in the Athenian Dionysian dramatic festival in 455 B.C. Euripides, in a span fifty years, wrote more than eighty plays, possibly as many as 120, only nineteen of which survive today in their entirety. During his lifetime, Euripedes won only four major awards at the festival, the first win coming in 441 B.C., compared to Aeschylus' thirteen and Sophocles' eighteen first-place victories. Euripedes was satirized by other Greek playwrights, especially Aristophanes, for his lack of rhetorical skills; however, his simple style was a favorite among the Greek populace. For either personal or professional reasons, Euripedes left Athens and went to Macedonia, where he died a few years later in 407 or 408 B.C. The exact cause of his death is not known; possible explanations include being torn apart by dogs, being unable to endure the harsh winters, and being killed by conspiring women. *Medea* was first produced in 431 B.C., and it won third prize at the festival

II. Social and Political Ideas—Athens Fifth Century B.C.

In Athens, the fifth century was a time of great achievements in all forms of art, from philosophy to architecture to literature. The city is frequently referred to as “the cradle of Western civilization” because of its democratic history. The people also had a strong sense of patriotism. The Athenian government of the time, however, was an exclusive democracy run by elected officials in the form of an open assembly. This assembly was responsible for matters of war and the election of officials. Participation in this democracy, however, was limited to only about ten percent of the population; women, slaves, and other “non-citizens” were excluded. The Peloponnesian War, which took place between 431-404 B.C., caused Athenian dominance over Greece to lessen, and within fifty years, Alexander the Great of Macedonia ruled all of Greece, essentially ending its “Golden Age.”

However, even during Euripedes' lifetime, the world was beginning to change, and one of those changes involved the status of women. *Medea*, the woman for whom this play is named, whatever else you may say about her, is clearly a person of vitality, conscience, and independence of mind.

Objectives

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

1. briefly identify the following people, stating reasons for their actions and listing at least two salient personality traits for each: Medea, Jason, and King Creon.
2. identify the function the Chorus serves in this play.
3. discuss the manner in which the Messenger is one of the conventions in Greek theater.
4. write a paragraph or two on each of the following sentences, using evidence from the play to support your opinion:
 - A. Medea can be said to represent all women of this time who suffer as a result of their inferior status in Greek society.
 - B. Uncontrolled emotions of hate and jealousy can overcome reason and bring destruction to all.
 - C. Fate plays a role in the lives of characters in this play.
 - D. Hubris, or excessive pride, leads to a person's downfall.
5. refute or support the following point, and back up your opinion by citing information from the text: Medea fulfills the definition of a tragic hero.
6. prove, by referring to the text, that Medea is or is not a sympathetic character.
7. identify the three classical unities and point out how they operate in this play.
8. explain the idea of deus ex machina and point out how it operates in this play.
9. explain some concepts and techniques involved in Greek drama, including hamartia, the Chorus, dramatic irony, and the Greek idea of tragedy.

Questions for Essay or Discussion

1. Write a brief sketch of these characters, identifying and explaining their actions, motivation, and salient personality features: Medea, Jason, and Creon.
2. Explain the functions of the Chorus in this play, and illustrate these with specific references to the text.
3. What is the basic meaning and function of the three classical unities? How do they operate in *Medea*?
4. Explain the term *deus ex machina*, and how it operates in this play.
5. Discuss, using specific examples from the play, the following themes and show how they are universal truths:
 - A. Childless people do not suffer the same worries and cares of those who do have children.
 - B. Being an alien in a foreign country is painful.
 - C. Unrestrained love is harmful, and moderation is best in all things.
 - D. The societal status of women can be seen as changing.
6. Discuss how the Greeks view fate and explain its function in this play.
7. Does Medea fit the definition of a tragic hero?
8. Prove that Medea, while she is a witch, is not insane. If she were simply a person who kills her children because she hears voices, why would this not be a tragic drama?
9. Discuss how messengers are used in Greek plays and why they are used in this fashion.

Medea

VOCABULARY

abstruse – difficult to understand
accursed – as if under a curse
adverse – unfavorable
anchorage – a place of safety
anointed – smeared
asylum – a safe place
avenging – punishing; getting revenge
base – lacking higher values
bastion – a fortress
benefactor – one who helps
bereft – lacking or deprived of
beseech – to beg
besieged – surrounded
bewailing – grieving or lamenting
ceased – stopped
consort – a spouse or companion
contumacious – rebellious
cowardice – lack of courage
denounce – to condemn or criticize
despise – to hate
dictatorial – forceful; bossy
endurance – the ability to last
enjoin – to command
entreat – to ask
exalt – to elevate or glorify
exile – forced removal from a place; banishment
expiation – the act of making amends or righting a wrong
garb – clothing
harmonious – agreeable; working together
heed – to obey or mind
hindering – preventing
impious – disrespectful
incur – to bring upon oneself; suffer
insatiate – never-ending
irreparably – in a manner beyond repair
kinslayers – people who kill their family
lyre – a stringed instrument related to the harp
meekly – mildly or obediently
mince – to restrain

9. The Nurse concludes her speech with:

It is clear that she will soon light
with greater spirit the cloud
of lamentation now rising
in its beginning. Whatever will
her heart, bitten by troubles,
high-spirited, hard to check, do?

Does it seem to you that Medea's rage is justified by what has happened to her or is she overdoing it?

10. In the following comment, the Nurse articulates a prominent belief of the ancient Greeks. Put this belief into your own words.

It is better to live always among equals;
for myself, at any rate, I hope
to grow old securely in modest circumstances.
First of all, the very idea of moderation
wins first prize in speaking, and in action,
is by far the best way for mortals, but excessive power
can produce no proper return for human beings,
instead giving back greater madness
whenever God is angry at the house.

11. The Chorus in this play is made up of male actors, and in this play, they represent the women of Corinth. What does the Chorus overhear Medea saying?

27. What does Medea offer Aegeus, and what does she ask of him?

28. What is Medea's object in keeping Aegeus unaware of her plans for vengeance?

29. What realization has Aegeus quite accidentally given to Medea?

30. What is Medea's plan?

31. What are Medea's plans for her own children?
