Initiation into Tragedy

GN: In the “spirit” of Halloween - if a hero has not achieved dikè in his or her lifetime, he or she returns as a ghost from Hades (since he or she has unfinished business).

Clip from The Shining (corresponds to the dialogue of the watchman in passage A and Cassandra in passage G): You will see that the characters are saying, “If this house had a human voice and could speak, it would be saying all sorts of things.” You have a character who turns out to be a ghost (Jack Nicholson). This clip highlights a moment in which his son has prophetic powers, just like Cassandra in the Agamemnon. Human blood begins to flood an elevator corridor, and this indicates something that has happened in the past (the anger of people who went to their death with unfinished business) and simultaneously represents an omen of what will happen in the future.

Key Word: atê – veering, aberration, derangement, disaster, punishment for disaster. Ate can be the result of damage or the cause of damage. If atê is spelt with the lowercase a, then we know that it is the consequence of tragedy.

➤ Hamartia: error. However, it is dangerous to refer to something as a “fatal flaw” because that way of talking separates the character from the plot.

GN: The most traditional metaphor of atê is being blown off course by an evil wind. Hamartia is missing the mark when shooting toward a target. On a side note, Artemis, the sister of Apollo, is the goddess of winds (whether good winds or bad winds). She also controls menstruation. The controls that Artemis has over menstruation, sacrifices related to menstruation, and the winds will appear in future tragedies. One such prominent sacrifice in Agamemnon is the sacrifice of Agamemnon’s daughter (human sacrifice of a young virgin).

Liz: The relationship between Artemis and girls - any transition between childhood and puberty is a very hazardous time. Greeks had a belief that a young girl on the cusp of getting her period must get married soon or she will be subjected to the wandering womb sickness. For example, if you were a 13-year-old girl, you must engage in a lot of rites to Artemis.

GN: With this, we proceed to the metaphor of the lion cub. The words of Aeschylus refer to it as an ainos. Looking at Passage A, the royal family finds an orphan lion cub. Things are proceeding well until the lion cub becomes a lion (telos or fulfillment of its potential). The lion becomes a beast and ravages all the sheep in the household. Let us ask, “Who is the lion cub?” Our first instinct is to say “Helen.” However, the lion cub keeps changing as you read the tragedy. The definition of the lion cub keeps changing as the plot develops. The million-dollar question: “Is atê avoidable?”
Passage B: We can argue about who the night watchman is. He takes the position of a dog (feel free to come up with interpretations of this analogy). It is passages like the watchman that led to myths telling how Aeschylus revealed religious secrets of the Athenian state (for example, consider the mystical language of the watchman’s words). A lot of the words being used in this passage are typical of words that real-life people heard when initiated into mysteries. One such word is *sumbolon* or symbol – it’s like a piece in a jigsaw puzzle.

Peggy: Why does Aeschylus use the watchman to open up the *Agamemnon*?

GN: Aeschylus still uses references from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but Aeschylus uses clever references to secondary characters. He uses characters like the seer and the watchman. For example, a seer like Kalkhas, who relays in the *Iliad* a prophetic order that Agamemnon does not want to hear (he must give up his mistress), is blamed by Agamemnon, whereas Agamemnon does not blame Kalkhas in Aeschylus’ tragedy (where the prophetic order says that Agamemnon must give up his own daughter).

Passage C: We see an image of a bird robbing an animal. “Erinys” or “Fury” is a superhuman personification of the vengeful anger stored up in those who died. The Fury is activated by some moral outrage that has happened. The predatory birds can be seen as the representatives of this Fury. Another theme in the passage is the trend towards fulfillment.

Passage D: We see Artemis getting very angry at Agamemnon because she sees two predatory birds devouring an innocent hare with unborn offspring. She stops the winds so the Achaeans cannot sail to Troy. If Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter, that’s a corrupt sacrifice in the point of view of Aeschylus’s audience. You don’t sacrifice humans, you sacrifice animals.

Liz: One criterion of a sacrifice is that the animal makes no sound. There is a lot of attention paid to the gag put in Agamemnon’s daughter’s mouth, showing just how perverse the scene is.

GN: This sacrifice will unleash a cosmic sanction: *ménis*. This is the kind of anger that comes when the cosmos are provoked.

Passage E: Clytemnestra is speaking about the seasons of the year. She describes a season, the Dog Days, in which everything that grows will wither. The word *sémainó* allows us to ask, “Will there be sterility or fertility?” Clytemnestra also asks Agamemnon to step on the purple cloth, which is a very rare color and fabric. She is saying, “Don’t worry - we can harvest those purple shells until kingdom come.”

Passage F: Cassandra knows that she is going to die, just as the boy in *The Shining* sees the flood of blood. Cassandra was violated already at Troy, as we know from epic and tragic narratives that are also represented in vase paintings. In this passage, as she is unveiling her speech before her sacrifice, the winds start blowing again. Artemis is provoked once more by human sacrifice of Cassandra at the hands of Clytemnestra. Looking at the art and pottery, Cassandra is about to be slaughtered.
Passage G: This speech is exactly what unleashes the Erinyes. There is much unfinished business. Unlike Iphigeneia, Cassandra verbalizes her emotions before her sacrifice.

Saskia: Iphigeneia is compared to a picture during her sacrifice.