

Synopsis for Helen Had a Sister

By Penelope Haines

2-line Summary:

Clytemnestra's courageous spirit, passionate love and lust for life mark her as a unique heroine. A tale of betrayal, murder, adultery and revenge set in ancient Greece at the time of the Trojan war.

Short Synopsis:

In a world where women are submissive, she rules.

In a world where wives are loyal, she is unfaithful.

In a world where honour and blood feuds abound she exacts the ultimate revenge.

An adventurous princess from a famous family, Clytemnestra's courageous spirit, passionate love and lust for life mark her as a unique heroine. From Homer's Iliad comes the story of one woman's fight for her family, her kingdom and her own survival.

Medium Synopsis:

An adventurous princess from a famous family, Clytemnestra's courageous spirit, passionate love and lust for life mark her as a unique heroine. From Homer's Iliad comes the story of one woman's fight for her family, her kingdom and her own survival.

When her husband, Agamemnon, his army stranded in Greece because of unfavourable winds, sends for his daughter Iphigenia and has her sacrificed to propitiate Artemis, Nestra swears revenge and takes an oath to kill Agamemnon when he returns. Helped by her lover Aegisthus, she takes her revenge and murders her husband when he returns to the city.

Her action triggers a response from her children which she hadn't anticipated. Her daughter Electra encourages her son Orestes to flee, in case he too is murdered. Orestes grows up torn between his deep love for his mother, and his knowledge that he must avenge his father by killing her.

Clytemnestra's story has fascinated people from classical Greece to contemporary times. Almost always portrayed as evil, she has been the subject of several plays, paintings and even a ballet. This retelling of her life is an attempt to see the woman behind the myth.

Long Synopsis:

The kingdoms of ancient Greece feud and fight for territory, and across in Asia Minor the great city of Troy is becoming ever more formidable. This is the world of Homer's Iliad. A culture of war, violence and blood feud where the highest aspiration for a man is to become a hero and his destiny is defined by his House and family name.

Clytemnestra, known to friends and family as Nestra, is born a princess of the Royal House of Sparta. Her mother Leda is so famous a beauty that Zeus himself is reputed to have coupled with her in the guise of a swan. Helen, her sister, grows up to be the most beautiful woman in the world, the “face that launched a thousand ships” and ultimately brings about the fall of Troy.

Given such a pedigree, Nestra was never going to settle for being ordinary. She is twelve when the Atreides brothers, Agamemnon and Menelaus seek refuge in Sparta. Granted sanctuary by Nestra’s father, the brothers bring the story of their family’s bloody tragedy, their wealth and a vision of a world outside Sparta’s mountainous valley. Nestra is both repelled and enthralled by their exotic history and finds herself drawn towards the complex, charismatic Agamemnon.

When Helen is abducted by Theseus of Athens, Nestra, a warrior herself, insists on going with the troop sent to rescue her sister. The short, brutal, recovery operation is successful, and the shared mission serves to deepen the bond between Nestra and the Mycenaean prince. After Agamemnon wins back his kingdom of Mycenae, Nestra becomes his bride.

As Queen of Mycenae, Nestra faces many challenges, not least the complex nature of her husband. She draws on her native courage and strength to master her situation, and focusses her energies on serving Mycenae.

When Helen, now married to his brother Menelaus, decides to run away with the Trojan Prince Paris, Agamemnon has the excuse he needs to draw the armies of Greece together and invade Troy. When the armies depart for Troy, leaving Nestra and her three children, Nestra is left in charge of the city.

Agamemnon, his army stranded in Greece because of unfavourable winds, sends for his daughter Iphigenia and has her sacrificed to propitiate Artemis. Nestra swears revenge for this appalling betrayal, and takes an oath in front of the gods to kill Agamemnon when he returns. Helped by her lover Aegisthus, she takes her revenge and murders her husband when he returns to the city.

Her action triggers a response from her children which she hadn’t anticipated. Her daughter Electra encourages her son Orestes to flee in case he too is murdered and Orestes grows up torn between his deep love of his mother, and his knowledge that he must avenge his father by killing her.

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Five Points of Interest about the Book's Content or Story:

1. My name, Penelope, comes from a character in Homer's epic works *The Illiad* and *The Odyssey*. Possibly because of this, I have been fascinated by Ancient Greek myths and stories since I was a child. My father, who loved Classical Greek culture and literature, told me many of the myths as bedtime stories. When I was seven, my parents took me to Greece on holiday, and I vividly remember going to Delphi where the oracles were delivered; Crete, where the Minotaur was slain; and Delos where Apollo was born. The physical historical evidence of these sites made the stories even more compelling to my childish imagination.
2. At some point in my teens I was rereading *The Odyssey* and realised how interconnected the tales were. The Trojan War provided a focus around which other myths were massaged to make a coherent narrative. Generations of storytellers adapted the tales to fit this pivotal event. Thus Theseus, famous for slaughtering the Minotaur, is brought into the story as the first abductor of Helen of Sparta. The house of Atreides with its terrible history becomes Agamemnon's heritage. My own namesake, Penelope, the long-suffering wife of Odysseus, is cousin to Helen of Troy and her sister Clytemnestra. These three women, with their vastly different reputations and fortunes, intrigued me, and I knew then it was a story I wanted to tell.
3. It's a man's world! Clytemnestra's motive for murdering her husband is usually presented as a political plot to bring her lover Aegisthus to power, or alternatively as jealous rage because Agamemnon brings Cassandra back from Troy with him. The more obvious motive, at least to my mind, of vengeance for Iphigenia's murder, is largely ignored or treated as a relatively minor subtext by the ancient playwrights.
4. Until the mid-nineteenth century, the Trojan War was considered to be non-historical, but the German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann was convinced that Troy was at Hissarlik in Turkey, and he took over the excavations on the site from its previous owner. This identification is now largely accepted by scholars. Whether the Trojan War actually occurred as Homer described is a harder question to answer. Those who believe the stories are true point to archaeological evidence of a catastrophic burning of Troy apparent at one level of the excavated ruins. If true, the war is generally dated between 1260 and 1240 BC, at the end of the Mycenaean period.
As Homer didn't compose *The Illiad* and *The Odyssey* until the 8th or 7th century BC, several centuries after the events, it is reasonable to assume his stories are a fusion of tales circulating around ancient sieges and expeditions by the Mycenaeans during the Bronze Age.
5. Perhaps the hardest part of writing this book has been evoking a culture where patricide, matricide and fratricide are acceptable as tools to fulfil oaths of vengeance. The culture of

war, violence and blood feud is a very different ethos to modern Western sensibilities, although it is not hard to find instances of it even today in our news media. I have elected a *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* approach, where I posit that human nature and motivations have changed little over the centuries, although cultural expressions of dangerous emotions may have altered as society has developed. We enjoy Shakespeare's plays, or the Classical Greek tragedies precisely because we can still understand what drives the protagonists in these dramas.