Sample Essays

Sample 1: an Essay Plan and Introduction

Topic:
“Let no one think me a weak and feeble woman, or one to let things pass, but rather one of the other sort…”

What is it that makes Medea different from those who surround her?

Plan
The overall focus is on Medea and on the qualities that distinguish her both from other characters and from the prevailing societal norms which they accept.

Key Word
- “different” - Medea is neither typical nor conventional; in terms of both her personality and her actions, she stands out as distinct from those who abide by the social consensus.

Introduction
Some time before the action of Medea commences, we learn that Medea has exerted herself to fit into her new social context in Corinth. According to the Nurse, she “has won a warm welcome from her new fellow citizens”, and she “seeks to please her husband in all she does”. Such compliance with social norms is not, however, destined to last. For from being what Jason deems a “sensible woman”, Medea is capable of passionate indignation. She is not by nature “weak or feeble”; instead, she demonstrates, like others of “royal blood”, a frightening nature. Her background and temperament work together to predispose Medea to seek revenge for injuries done to her.

Paragraph Two
Focus on Medea’s exile:
- Medea tells the women of Corinth that she is different and her situation is more precarious than theirs: “You have your city here and the homes where your fathers have lived; you enjoy life’s pleasures and the companionship of those you love. But what of me?”
- She appeals to their hearts, saying she has “no mother to turn to, no brother or kinsman to rescue me from this sea of troubles”.

- Medea’s status as an exile does, to some extent, set her apart from the women of Corinth (who form the Chorus of the play), but she uses this point of difference to argue - ultimately for the purposes of pursuing her revenge - that she is particularly unfortunate and deserving of sympathy.

Paragraph Three
Focus on Medea’s pedigree:
- The Nurse observes that, “they have frightening natures, those of royal blood, because, I imagine, they’re seldom overruled and generally have their way. They do not easily forget a grudge.”
- Medea urges herself on, saying, “Are you to be laughed at by this Jason and his glibly-wedded, you whose noble father is the Sun?”
- Medea is conscious of her lineage. This lineage is a source of pride that sets her apart from commoners and leads her to expect to be treated with dignity. Furthermore, it makes possible her escape at the end of the play. The character in which she makes her exit has been sent by her grandfather, Helios, the Sun-god.

Paragraph Four
Focus on Medea’s foreignness:
- Medea indicates that “one who has made ... [her] home in a strange city,” is particularly vulnerable because she does not automatically belong.
- As a foreign woman, Medea is believed to be a skilled successor “who is no stranger to dark knowledge.”
- Medea thinks that Jason sees “marriage to a foreigner” as a liability now that he is growing older.
- The relationship between Medea and Jason is tainted by racial conflict. Medea regrets that she succumbed to “the words of a Greek” and Jason despises that he chose a wife from “an uncivilized country” in preference to a Greek wife. Medea is different, simply because she is not Greek.

Paragraph Five
Focus on Medea’s defiance of her maternal role:
- The Nurse recognizes warning signs in Medea’s behaviour and attempts to intercede with her, saying, “What makes you blame the children too for their father’s crime? Why do you hate them?”

Medea
The Chorus suggest that Medea will, when it comes to it, be unable to kill her sons: "you will not be able to dip your hand in blood with a heart that does not fail".

Although she feels the bonds of maternal affection, Medea does kill her children. In doing so, she violates profoundly important personal bonds and social conventions. Jason believes that this can only be the act of an outsider, saying, "Not a woman in Greece today would ever have dared such a thing".

Conclusion

Medea's difference exists at many different levels. In terms of circumstance, she is an exile and foreigner whose modes of behaviour are not automatically those of her adopted city. More profoundly, however, Medea is temperamentally at odds with her new surroundings. Conscious of her royal dignity and pedigree, she is not content to be "weak or foible". She pursues her own agenda even though she recognizes the horror of her intended actions and knows that she will alienate the sympathies of all concerned. She is, indeed, "no ordinary woman", but decidedly "of the other sort".

Sample 2: A Complete Essay

**Topic:**

'Medea challenges the notion of what it is to be a hero.' Discuss.

The ancient Greek understanding of heroism was primarily centred on prowess. They acknowledged as exceptional a certain category of individuals who:

Prominent in their particular sphere of power ... imbued their will on others with the confidence, the unquestioning certainty of their own right and worth that is characteristic of the gods. Such people the Greeks called heroes; they recognized the fact that they transcended the norms of humanity. (Koelsch 1990, p. 45)

It was in the nature of such heroes to seek fame and to abide by a code which dictated that they be "a generous friend but an enemy to be feared". In Euripides' Medea, both Jason and Medea have claims to be regarded as heroic, but both constitute flawed versions of the hero.

The mythological figure of Jason is associated with various great feats, including the voyage of the Argonauts and the quest of the Golden Fleece. When we meet him in Medea, however, he is an ageing man, and these exploits are long behind him. Despite this, he still asserts his adherence to the heroic creed: "I should not wish either for gold in my house or the skill to sing a song sweeter than any Orpheus sang, if these gifts were not accompanied by a famous name." As the play proceeds, there are various attacks on Jason's fame. Medea, for instance, asserts that many of his previous triumphs were due to her, that she "lifted up the torch" of his success, instructed him in how to accomplish his quest, and saved his life. Jason disputes this but cannot deny - albeit insulting - that "where you did give assistance it was of some benefit". He lacks the self-reliance and capacity to act in his own, unaided capacity, which might seem typical of the hero. Throughout the action of Medea, he is no longer a hero whose life revolves around action, but a man who must negotiate numerous verbal hazards. In language that evokes his former life at sea, he tells Medea:

"It seems I must prove myself a capable speaker indeed, my lady, and, like a seasoned helmsman, I must trim the edge of my sail to run before the impact of your noisy provocations."

Anticipating Medea's rage, Jason proceeds with caution and becomes the spokesman of a most unholy prudence. When he tells Medea that his new marriage will "make you safe", she scorn him declining, "I only hope I may never enjoy a life of prosperity that brings pain or a..."
granddaughter of a god. Moreover, the way in which she brings about the deaths of Glauce and Crown (punishing by stealth) is hardly glorious. She achieves infamy rather than fame.

Granted that the Greeks recognised heroes as those who rose above the common lot of mankind and exhibited exceptional capabilities, it is difficult to see either Jason or Medea as an unambiguous hero. Jason’s past may, to a certain extent, have been heroic, but his future is inglorious and his actions in the play are more those of a forlorn than of a figure of stature. Medea, conversely, possesses heroic resolve and succeeds in accomplishing her revenge, but, in doing so, she transgresses core elements of the heroic code. In the last resort, there are no heroes in Medea.

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This point is related to description. 1950.

Medea

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Essay Questions

1. "Towards the end of the play, the Chorus refers to Medea as "the wretched woman whom fiends have turned into a murderous Fury!" Is this how you see Medea?

2. "Because Medea has supernatural powers, she cannot represent the cause of women in society." Do you agree?

3. "Ah, the loves of mortal men! What a boundless source of woe!" What role do irrational forces play in Medea?

4. "Euripides is essentially conservative in Medea, reinforcing patriarchal stereotypes and male fears about women." Discuss.

5. "It is impossible to take sides at the end of the play: both Medea and Jason are equally repugnant." Do you agree?

6. "[Here] you have come to know justice and the use of law, instead of being subject to force." Is Medea justified in creating her own form of justice?

7. "I am ... the plunder he brought back from a foreign land." "The play revolves around the fact that Medea has no city of her own." Discuss.

8. Jason: "You abomination, what woman can earn more hatred than you, from the gods, from me, from the whole human race?" Is this a valid description of Medea?