

Sophocles – Ajax – Summary and Analysis

Sophocles – The Tragic Homer is one of the great playwrights the Greek civilization has ever witnessed. He is famous for his trio of plays called as the Oedipus cycle. The play Ajax is considered a remarkable piece of tragedy and the view of a dramatist of the civilization where gods intervened in the matter of men. The Greek population revered Sophocles and by reading his plays one would feel that their actions are justifiable. The Ajax summary and analysis given here provides an overview of the excellent tragic play by Sophocles.

Setting of the Play

After the death of Achilles, his armour was decided to be handed over to Odysseus rather than Ajax the higher. The decision took by Agamemnon and Menelaus – the two Greek commanders infuriates Ajax. Therefore, he decides to kill the three and Goddess Athena intervenes. She mystifies the mind of the great warrior and he believes the camp cattle to be the Greek warriors. He slaughters the cattle and this news goes to Odysseus. He tries to inspect the issue and Athena watches Odysseus looking for the truth.

Ajax Summary - Prologue

The play opens with Athena greeting Odysseus in front of the tent of Ajax. She confirms the actions of the great warrior and agrees that it was intervention that prevented the death of Odysseus and the two commanders. Odysseus inquires about the reason and gets to know that it was because of the armour of Achilles. Odysseus feels terrified about the news and now becomes petrified even to look near the tent of his rival. However, Athena insists Odysseus to look at the horrific scenes and realize what would have happened to the Greek army without her.

But, Odysseus shows no intent whatsoever to go near and the goddess promises to bamboozle the sight of Ajax so that he cannot see Odysseus. Then, she calls him out despite the fearful words of Odysseus. Ajax, still believing that he has captured his own men instead of cattle comes out with pride. Athena inquires about his doings and asks about the two Commanders. He gladly says that they are put to eternal sleep. When she asks about Odysseus, he says that he is tied to a pole inside the tent and he will torture him whiplashes until he dies. He returns to his tent after asking Athena to be on his side as she always did.

After the exit of Ajax, Athena remarks about the power of gods and how wise men are rewarded instead of the arrogant. Odysseus shows concerns about his life and believes that life is but an illusion. She says that the life of a man can come down in a day or excel in a day. Therefore, man has to be careful while making decisions.

[Chorus – Sailors from Salamis]

PARADOS: A group of Ajax's sailors enter the stage concerned about the news they heard. They are very sympathetic towards Ajax are not ready to believe the rumours. They urge their master to come out of the tent and mute the lambs as the mighty eagle.

STROPHE: The Strophe speaks of the assumed reasons for the misdeeds of Ajax. They question whether Ajax's predicament was due to not offering a tribute to Artemis after a victorious war or not giving a gift after hunting down a deer. If not Artemis they anticipate it to be Mars who did this to Ajax for not thanking him after a battle.

ANTISTROPHE: The Antistrophe shows anger and sympathy at Ajax at the same time. They accuse him for attacking the flocks without minding the virtue of the deed. However, they console this by turning their mind towards Zeus and Apollo. The deed was done by dizziness sent from the Gods. They suspect that the two commanders and Odysseus conspired against Ajax and are spreading the rumours. So, they ask Telamon's son to come out of the tent and prove his innocence.

EPODE: The Strophe and Antistrophe after balancing their sections unite in the Epode to call out Ajax from the tent. They want him to deliver them from pain caused by the babbling of others spreading the rumours across the Greek camp.

CHORAL DIALOGUE: Tecmessa, wife of Ajax comes out to address the chorus of sailors who came from Salamis. She comes out with a lot of grief and explains the disastrous situation of the her husband to the sailors. Tecmessa believes that the feat of Ajax is a bad omen and indicates something bad is going to happen to the great warrior. The sailors ask her for more details and she starts to explain the incident the other night. Tecmessa says that Ajax pulled the flocks with the help of a rope and forced them into the tent. Then he started to butcher them and flogged them and abusing like no man on the world. The sailors cannot tolerate the news and wants to flee the battle ground because they knew what the Commanders would do by using the horrible predicament of Ajax. They believe that his fate is sealed. However, Tecmessa says that the old condition of Ajax is not a bothering one. She says that he has come out of the situation just like the calming effect after a lightning. Ajax realizes the harm he'd done to the cattle and is bitter with pain and torment.

Ajax Analysis – Prologue

Sophocles directly bashes on the cowardly character of Odysseus with the dialogues of Athena. This is a contrasting depiction to Homer and some of the Greek writers mention Odysseus as a man with little courage. On the contrary, Ajax is show with great might and his fury is diverted only by a Goddess; otherwise, he would have killed his rivals. It can also be observed that Agamemnon and Menelaus favoured Odysseus because of his deceptive ways. The reaction of Ajax is understandable and the actions of Athena are completely biased. By writing such words, Sophocles seems to intentionally oppose the views of Homer about the Trojan War.

Ajax Summary – First Episode

As the first episode opens, the sailors of Salamis are seen still having conversation with Tecmessa. They express by knowing that he is out of his illusions and is back to reality. However, Tecmessa says that everyone is suffering a double pain with the actions that took place. In explanation, she says that Ajax has to suffer a single pain i.e. knowing that he committed such a heinous act; whereas she and his followers must bear witness to the horror he'd done and look at this sorrowful state after gets out of the illusion. The sailors couldn't agree more as she recounts the incident once again.

Meanwhile, they hear a screaming sound and the wife of Ajax reveals that it is her husband's voice. Ajax calls for Teucer from within the tent and the sailors feel that he returned to his former self again. At that moment, Tecmessa opens the tent entrance and they all see the slaughtered cattle and their master sitting amidst the bloodshed creatures. He speaks to the sailors directly and asks them to look at his situation. He calls them his 'only friends' and asks them to kill him for the act he has committed. They simply reject the order and say that pain cannot be healed with pain; they advice him to not think of a remedy that is worse than the actual disease.

Ajax feels very shameful about his deeds and feels sad that instead of killing Odysseus he spilled the blood of innocent cattle. His men try to convince him that the deed belongs to past and there is

nothing one can do to undo it. But, he goes on and thinks that Odysseus would be laughing in his tent. Then he prays Zeus to see that death comes to Odysseus, Agamemnon, Menelaus and he says that he would like to have a peaceful death. Tecmessa intervenes and says that if that is the case then she asks him to pray for her death also.

Ajax still believes that he doesn't belong in the light and feels that it would be better if he resorts to darkness. He feels that the daughter of Zeus is tormenting his mind and he cannot escape this punishment. As his fame is erased with the deeds, he prefers to be killed by the swords of the entire army. He bids goodbye to the sea where he banked for years during the war as if he longs to die for the disgraceful deeds he'd committed.

Ajax Analysis – First Episode

The sailors are very persistent to ensure Ajax comes out of his unfortunate demeanour and so is Tecmessa. This is a huge contrast to the lead characters of Homer – Paris and Helen. Where Paris, the prince of Troy and an important member of the army betrays his own clan for a girl; Helen betrays the Greeks for trivial pleasures in life. The sailors of Salamis remain true to their master even in such dire moments and Tecmessa is ready to die along with her husband. Sophocles intends to show the faithfulness of the wife of Ajax and the sailors, thereby showing that Ajax himself is a noble, warm-hearted and superior warrior.

Ajax Summary – Second Episode

Ajax [Greek name – Aias] feels that his name is a fitting one to equivocate to his doom [Aiai – Greek word for Alas]. He ruminates on the victories of his father and the cheers for him while returning; whereas he disgraced his people by killing innocent cattle. Despite all these Ajax strongly believes that if Achilles were given the choice to pass on his armour, then he would have without any hesitancy given it to him. He feels that if Menelaus and Agamemnon had not willed the armour to another man and had not the gods go against him, then he would have earned the armour of Achilles.

The great warrior understands his predicament and says that if god's will a strong man can be beaten to death by a weak man. He regrets the fact that his rivals are roaming free and the Greek army would hate him for his deeds. Therefore, he is not loved anywhere and is uncertain to go home as well. At home he cannot confront his father Telamon as his father cannot see his son return without a victory. Ajax believes that Telamon would rather be proud when he knows that his son gave life in battle for a noble cause. He concludes that a man without any hopes is indifferent to life and death.

Tecmessa opposes the views of her husband and implores him to think about the entirety of taking one's life. She emphasizes that immediately after the death of Ajax; the Argives will take her and their son as slaves. People will call her the concubine of Ajax, once a noble wife now the slave to many. She reminds him of his father and mother who would be robbed of their son at such old age. She reminds him of his son, who will sorely miss his father and will not have someone to guide him as he grows up. The chorus of sailors too join and ask Ajax whether the pitiful pleas of Tecmessa did not touch him! Tecmessa says that she will obey any order given by him. Then, Ajax orders her to summon his son. She reveals that their son was sent away as she was afraid. The great warrior applauds her foresight and asks her to bring his son now that he is back to his senses.

When Eurysaces is brought by a maid, he advises him to be like him in bravery and other heroic elements. However, he wishes that his son would have an additional trait of luck so that he could

never end up like him. He envies the childish looks of his son and his innocence. Ajax assures Eurysaces that despite his absence; Teucer will safeguard him and turn him into a fine warrior. He orders his sailors to give message to Teucer that Eurysaces should be taken to his [Ajax] father [Telamon] and mother [Eriboea]. Ajax states that there shall be no contest held for his armour as it will be conducted by the ones who ruined his life. He gives his shield to Eurysaces and commands to bury the rest of the armour in his [Ajax] grave. After giving all the orders and handing Eurysaces; Ajax asks everyone to leave and close the tent.

The sailors are alarmed by this order, Tecmessa begs Ajax to not take any unworthy decisions and leave his followers deserted. But, Ajax doesn't listen and says that his service to the Gods is over and no one can change his character. Eurysaces is handed over to a nurse and Tecmessa follows Ajax into the tent. The sailors lament in many ways and feel that the predicament of Ajax is not seen anywhere else in the world.

Ajax Analysis – Second Episode

Sophocles shows Ajax as a man of emotion, philosophy, and responsibility through the second episode. The myriad emotions of Ajax like remorse, love, friendship, forbearance, etc. are shown throughout and he seems to carefully blend them all regardless of his actions. His well learned conversations with the sailors and his wife Tecmessa show that despite his actions overnight, he speaks with a great tone answering the questions of everyone. His sense of responsibility is shown when he asks the sailors to take care of Eurysaces and thinks beyond his death when he speaks of his armour. However, as every man has a weakness Sophocles too is bound by one i.e. feeling shameful for his actions and deciding to commit suicide.

Ajax Summary – Third Episode

Ajax comes out of the tent cursing himself for breaking his oath. He feels that a man of steel like him is outdone by the words of a woman. Through his words the audience come to know that his plan to commit suicide has been thrown aside. It is further found that Tecmessa reiterated on the fact that she will be widowed and his son will become susceptible to enemy attacks without a father.

Ajax says that he will go to the meadows to clean away his sins and bury the sword of Hector [which he acquired as a gift from Hector]. He accepts the fact that he is answerable to the two Commanders and after purging he accepts to follow their lead without any hesitancy. Ajax asks Tecmessa to go inside the tent and pray the Gods so that his heart's desires may come true. He commands the sailors of Salamis to provide his message to Teucer if he comes during his absence. He assures the sailors that his unlucky phase of life is over and everything will be alright. The sailors of Salamis become ecstatic after hearing his words and thank the Gods for lifting the fog from the mind of Ajax.

Ajax Analysis – Third Episode

The world knows through the works of Homer that Ajax is a great warrior who uses brute force but is not a man who can be subtle in thinking. Contrary to this view, Sophocles has shown Ajax with great calmness and understanding of the situation. He understands that he cannot fulfil his heart's desire [to take his own life] in front of Tecmessa; so, he cleverly behaves as if he understands his faults. He reassures everyone that he will be alright and is going to the meadows to purge his sins. But, from his words the reader can understand that he is actually going with some other intent.

Ajax Summary – Fourth Episode

A soldier approaches the camp of Ajax in a hurry and asks about the whereabouts of Ajax. He reveals that Teucer has arrived, but is halted by the Argives who attacked him. Through his words, it is known that the matter had to be settled by the intervention of the elderly. He says that he hurried to the camp with an urgent message from Teucer. The soldiers answer that Ajax had gone out to purge himself of the things he had committed. The messenger sighs that he is too late and could not accomplish his goal.

The sailors of Salamis explain that their lord went to please the Gods to be on his side again. But, the soldier sent by Teucer feels that the prophecy given by Calchas would become true. On enquiring about details, he explains at length about the conversation between Calchas and Teucer. It is known that Calchas foresees the doom of Ajax and advises Teucer to not let Ajax come out of the tent for that day. Calchas even reveals the reason for the Gods to turn against Ajax the mighty.

First, when Telamon praises the victory of his son in a battle and thanks the heavens for making it possible; Ajax replies that any mortal could be victorious with Gods' intervention and he expects to do it without the help of them.

Second, when Ajax was fighting with the soldiers of Troy Athena was helping him to achieve victory. However, Ajax advised Athena to help others in need as he does not need help and can gain victory alone.

Calchas says that these incidents have turned the favour of Gods against Ajax and their anger would disappear the next day. Therefore, he advises Teucer to ensure Ajax stays put in his tent. After hearing this terrible news the sailors call for Tecmessa to inform her of the sad prophecy. As soon as she hears the news she asks part of the sailors to get Teucer and part to follow her to search for her unstable husband before it is too late.

Ajax Analysis – Fourth Episode

Sophocles reveals the reason after a long suspense created in the previous episodes. He makes use of the seer Calchas who is well known to the Greeks for his accurate prophecies. The sarcastic and critical attitude of Greeks is shown instead of the valorous Greeks [as shown in Homer's epics]. The readers can find this side of the Greeks from the way they treat the returning Teucer.

Ajax Summary – Fifth Episode

As the scene opens, Ajax is shown anchoring his sword to the ground in a way that the blade points towards the sky. He says that the sword is ready to perform his duty and asks Zeus to do him a favour. He asks Zeus to send a message to Teucer and the message is to ensure that it is Teucer who lifts the body of Ajax from the sword. He urges God to send Teucer swiftly for he does not want his body to be discovered by dogs or enemies. He calls upon Hermes to have a neat death and journey to the underworld. He prays to the Furies and begs them to witness the wrongs done to him by Odysseus and punish those befittingly. He requests Apollo to carry the news of his death to his parents. Finally, Ajax remembers Salamis and salutes to the place that brought him up as a great warrior. Then,

Ajax falls on the grounded sword and it pierces his heart.

As the two teams of sailors meet at a point still trying to find the whereabouts of their lord, they hear a cry. They find Tecmessa beating her breasts lamenting for the death of Ajax. She blames the Gods for the death of Ajax and worries for the future of Eurysaces. The sailors mourn dreadfully for the loss of Ajax.

Ajax Analysis – Fifth Episode

Ajax chooses the most painful way to die i.e. through the stabbing of sword, which gives searing pain till the last breath is taken. This symbolizes his bravery and the way he lived throughout his life. Further, Ajax symbolizes an independent who does not want to live under the grace of anyone and achieve his victories through his valour and hard work. However, as observed today such people who do not follow the well travelled path are hated and criticized. In the end, Ajax commits suicide succumbing to the shame and fearful that he might encounter his rivals after failure.

Ajax Summary – Sixth Episode

Teucer approaches and confirms with the sailors the rumours he has been hearing. He feels distraught after learning that Ajax is indeed dead. Teucer cannot find a way to confront his father – Telamon nor does he believe that he will no longer be a free man and will be enslaved with the absence of his brother. In his presence, the sailors take out the body of Ajax and Teucer wonders how Hector has taken his enemy down despite being dead. As they mourn, Menelaus with his army is seen approaching them.

Menelaus orders the sailors to not move the body and let him rot in the sands. He gives a long speech about the attitude of Ajax when Teucer asks why anyone should obey his orders. Menelaus justifies his words by saying that Ajax was brought to Troy as an ally but he turned against the Greeks. If it were not for the intervention of Gods he would have slaughtered the Greeks. In addition, Menelaus claims that despite being a subordinate Ajax never listened to anyone and went on his own way. Now that he is dead, Menelaus believes that this is the time to show his authority and arrogance towards Ajax. So, he warns anyone who tries to bury Ajax unless they too want the same fate.

Teucer doesn't back down from the debate and he strongly replies to the words of Menelaus. He says that Ajax came as a representative of Salamis, just as Menelaus is to Sparta. He asks Menelaus to go and show his superiority towards his men and he reminds him that the war they are waging is because of his incompetence and fleeing of his wife. They both exchange words and finally Menelaus orders that Ajax shall not be buried. However, Teucer reiterates that Ajax deserves the ritual and will be buried. Menelaus unable to win the oral squabble leaves the place cursing Teucer.

As Menelaus leaves, Tecmessa along with Eurysaces enter and Teucer asks Eurysaces to hold the hand of his father. He determines himself to dig a grave and before leaving makes a curse that anyone who tries to part the bond between Eurysaces and Ajax shall be cursed to perdition. He takes a contingent to help him with the grave. The rest still unable to take the news of the end of Ajax feel sad. They remind themselves how Ajax thought the Greeks the art of war with different weapons, how Ajax acted as a shield against the direst of enemies and how omnipotent he was in taking care of his men.

Ajax Analysis – Sixth Episode

Sophocles only alluded to the character of Teucer till the sixth episode but the reader doesn't find him anywhere in dialogue. The moment he arrives, Teucer fights off Menelaus and resorts to taking

care of his brother. This shows his loyalty towards his brother and it is an indication of the brotherly love shared by both. The oral fight with Teucer shows how justifiable words can calm the mightiest of Kings if they have done injustice. Sophocles used the conversation to reveal the reasons for the Trojan War and reminds Menelaus of his position in the war. It is more like Sophocles wants to contradict with the views on the so called “war heroes” of the day and bring out their true nature.

Ajax Summary – Seventh Episode

As the scene opens, Teucer holds a spade and seemingly prepared the grave for Ajax. He sees Agamemnon arriving to the place where Ajax is placed. On arrival Agamemnon stamps his authority and calls Teucer a bastard and slave for not listening to the orders. He questions the authority of Ajax even after his defeat during the battle for the armour of Achilles. He reminds Teucer that the judges made the decision during the battle and the decision was made simply because Ajax was a stubborn individual whereas Odysseus was a man of common sense. Agamemnon says to Teucer to bring a free born man to speak instead of him as he cannot understand the language of slaves or Barbarians.

Teucer ignores the words of Agamemnon and turns towards the corpse of his brother. He speaks to the dead Ajax and expresses his hateful feelings towards Agamemnon and the army. Teucer says that he could not understand why he [Ajax] protected with his life these betraying traitors who are now pushing aside the contributions [of Ajax] after death.

He speaks of the times when he saved the Greeks from the unnoticed marching troops of Hector and the incident where he fought Hector when his name came through a token [taken out of a helmet]. He reminds Agamemnon that he should not be the one to criticize someone as a barbarian. He reminds that Agamemnon’s grandfather Pelops is a barbarian and his father Atreus is well known for his obscene relations. He reminds the Commander that he is born to Telamon and daughter of Laomedon – both of noble blood making him a noble child. He bursts out at Agamemnon and says that if Ajax is to be thrown away like a stray individual, then he along with Tecmessa and Eurysaces would die to protect the honour of Ajax.

As their debate heats up, Odysseus enters the place and the sailors hope that he is there to resolve the situation rather than fuel it. He asks of the matter and Agamemnon immediately says that Teucer is being obstinate in letting go of the body of Ajax and has been insulting him. Odysseus listens to the complaints of Agamemnon and asks whether he can speak freely as a friend. The commander gives permission to do so.

Odysseus asks Agamemnon to treat Ajax with such brutality. He accepts that Ajax was his worst enemy in the ranks of the Greeks, but reminds everyone that he is the greatest warrior second only to Achilles amongst the ranks. Therefore, he deserves the respect of a proper burial even after his unwise actions recently. Agamemnon feels surprised that Odysseus has taken the side of Ajax instead of the Greeks. They argue supporting their own views where Agamemnon feels that it would be an act of cowardice, failure and rigidity to allow the burial; whereas, Odysseus says that it would be an act of reverence, humanity and generosity. Agamemnon finally succumbs to the words of Odysseus and leaves to his camp.

The sailors of Salamis praise Odysseus for his words and say that there is no match for him when it comes to winning the battle of words. Odysseus then turns to Teucer and reassures that he is a friend intending to bury Ajax with great respect. Teucer immediately pays his respect to Odysseus by letting him know how grateful he is. He says that no one in the Greek camp stood for his brother except him [Odysseus] who is supposedly the greatest rival of Ajax.

However, Teucer gently denies the presence of Odysseus in the burial. He feels that the soul of Ajax may feel devastating knowing that his worst rival is involved in the ritual. Teucer offers any other help as a token of friendship. Odysseus understands the words of Teucer, salutes to Ajax and departs. Teucer asks some men to bring the ablution rubrics for the ritual. He asks Eurysaces to life the body of Ajax who is still bleeding. He calls upon everyone who is a friend of Ajax and pay their tribute to the noble hero. The sailors close the scene with a tragic note:

“Mortals learn so many things by seeing,

Yet no man can

See the future of his being.”

Ajax Analysis – Seventh Episode

Sophocles shows Agamemnon as a man of aggression with far more superior arrogance than Menelaus. However, the bravery of Teucer holds him at bay and to add an unexpected twist the reader of audience witness the most unexpected entry i.e. of Odysseus. In the first episode, Sophocles shows Odysseus as a man of philosophy after witnessing the dire situation of Ajax. That element is used in the last one to save further insult to Ajax. Sophocles shows Odysseus as a changed man and helping Teucer against Agamemnon. However, he shows no disrespect to either of the men and settles the matter in the most subtle of ways.

The tragic play by Sophocles as can be observed from Ajax Summary and Analysis above contains the typical themes of honour, hatred, anger and other elements that are necessary to create a perfect tragedy.

If it is the weakness of man that kills Ajax, then it is the insolence of Gods towards man that created the consequences. This was fuelled by the unfair decisions of the judges who handed over the armour to Odysseus. One can point out the fault of Odysseus for accepting the armour of Achilles, as he is completely aware that he does not deserve such honour. However, he followed the commands of Agamemnon and Menelaus, whereas his counterpart failed to follow. Although, Odysseus makes up for his mistakes in the end, there is no denying the fact that Ajax committed suicide out of shame and feeling dishonoured. He deserves a chance to take revenge against his rivals, but being a man who has irrational tongue he offends the Gods on several occasions. This leads to the doom of the great warrior, raising the issue that if there was no such intervention he would have taken two of the most ruthless Commanders of the Greek army saving many desperate lives. Knowing Odysseus he would have escaped and brought the matter to a settlement. As it is well-known the Gods favoured the Greeks in the Trojan War; so, this was not supposed to happen and Ajax was to be the inevitable victim of fate.