

Exploring Literary Genres in Classical Greek and Latin Literature: An Analytical Overview

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Abstract: Background: Classical Greek and Latin literature laid the foundations for much of Western literary tradition, with a diverse array of genres ranging from epic poetry to philosophy. Understanding the variety and function of literary genres in these ancient texts is essential to grasping their enduring influence. This study examines the major literary genres in Greek and Latin literature, including epic, tragedy, comedy, lyric poetry, and philosophical works, analyzing their structures, themes, and historical contexts.

Methods: A comprehensive review of key texts from ancient Greek and Latin authors was conducted, focusing on works from Homer, Sophocles, Virgil, Ovid, and Cicero, among others. Each genre was explored through a close reading of representative works, supported by secondary literature that contextualizes these works within their respective periods.

Results: The study identifies key characteristics of major literary genres in classical literature, highlighting the evolution of these genres in response to political, social, and cultural changes in ancient Greece and Rome. Epic poetry, particularly the works of Homer and Virgil, is noted for its heroic themes and elaborate narrative structures. Tragedy and comedy, exemplified by Sophocles and Aristophanes, reflect the tension between individual destiny and societal norms. Lyric poetry and philosophical works provide insights into personal expression and intellectual exploration.

Conclusion: Classical Greek and Latin literature's diverse genres offer a rich understanding of ancient society and thought. The study underscores the ongoing influence of these genres on subsequent literary traditions and their relevance to contemporary literary studies.

Keywords: Classical literature, Greek literature, Latin literature, epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, lyric poetry, philosophy, Homer, Virgil, Sophocles, Aristophanes, Plato, Cicero, literary genres.

Introduction: Classical Greek and Latin literature forms the bedrock of Western literary traditions, with a vast range of genres that not only reflect the cultures in which they were produced but also continue to shape modern storytelling, drama, and philosophy. Greek and Roman authors explored universal themes such as heroism, fate, love, politics, and human nature, each through distinct literary forms that evolved over time. From the grand epics of Homer and Virgil to the philosophical dialogues of Plato and Cicero, these genres were more than just forms of artistic expression; they were vehicles for exploring the human condition, societal structures, and the role of individuals within them.

In both Greek and Latin literature, genres often intersected and evolved in response to changing

political landscapes, shifts in religious beliefs, and the development of intellectual thought. The earliest works of Greek literature, such as the epics "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey," set the stage for the development of many literary genres that would be central to Roman literature, including tragedy, comedy, and lyric poetry. Roman authors, particularly during the height of the Roman Empire, adapted and reshaped these genres, creating new forms of expression that reflected Roman values and concerns.

This study examines the major literary genres in classical Greek and Latin literature, offering a detailed analysis of their features, their cultural and historical contexts, and the ways in which these genres have influenced subsequent literary traditions. By analyzing texts from key authors, this article aims to provide a

deeper understanding of how genre functioned in ancient literature and how it continues to resonate in the modern literary world.

Classical Greek and Latin literature represents the cornerstone of Western literary tradition, providing the foundation for much of the literary, philosophical, and cultural heritage that continues to influence modern societies. From Homer's epic tales of gods and heroes to the philosophical treatises of Plato and Cicero, the works produced by Greek and Roman authors span a vast array of genres, each offering unique insights into human nature, society, and the world. The literary genres of the classical period not only reflect the intellectual and cultural developments of their time but also serve as important vehicles for exploring universal themes such as heroism, fate, morality, and the human condition. By studying these genres, we can better understand the worldview of ancient civilizations, the way they addressed social and political issues, and how their ideas have been preserved and adapted over the centuries.

Greek and Latin literature, while distinct in language, often shared thematic concerns and stylistic elements. For instance, Greek literature laid the groundwork for many of the literary genres that Roman authors later adapted and expanded. Greek authors, especially during the Classical and Hellenistic periods, experimented with forms such as epic poetry, drama (both tragedy and comedy), and lyric poetry. These genres were used to comment on the political, moral, and philosophical issues facing Greek society. For example, the epics of Homer explored themes of heroism and divine intervention, while Greek tragedies, such as those by Sophocles and Euripides, examined the complexities of fate, suffering, and human choices.

As the Roman Empire expanded, Roman authors began to draw heavily from Greek literary traditions. However, they adapted these forms to address the particular concerns and values of Roman society. Roman epic poetry, as exemplified by Virgil's *Aeneid*, reinterpreted the themes of Homer's works in a Roman context, linking the mythical past to the rise of the Roman Empire. Similarly, Roman comedy and tragedy retained Greek conventions but were often more focused on social commentary, reflecting the realities of Roman life, politics, and moral values.

The study of these genres provides a window into the ancient world, revealing how literature served both as a reflection of societal norms and as a tool for engaging with broader existential questions. Epic poetry, for example, was not only a means of telling grand stories of gods and heroes but also a vehicle for understanding a society's ideals, virtues, and collective memory.

Tragedy, on the other hand, engaged with the darker aspects of life, confronting questions of human suffering, destiny, and justice. Comedy offered a more lighthearted yet still profound critique of society, often challenging established norms and exploring the absurdities of life. Lyric poetry, with its emphasis on personal emotion, gave voice to individual experiences, while philosophical works sought to probe the nature of reality, ethics, and the purpose of human existence.

By analyzing these genres, we can also trace the evolution of literary forms and the ways in which they reflect shifting cultural values. For example, the transition from the heroic, divine-centered narratives of Greek epics to the more human-centered concerns of Roman literature indicates a shift in the perception of the individual and their role in society. Similarly, the transformation of Greek tragedy into its Roman counterpart reveals changing attitudes towards morality, personal agency, and fate.

In addition to their cultural and historical significance, the genres of classical literature have had a profound influence on subsequent literary traditions. The epic, for instance, has remained a dominant genre in Western literature, influencing works from Dante's *Divine Comedy* to Milton's *Paradise Lost* and beyond. Tragedy and comedy continue to be central to dramatic arts, with their roots firmly planted in the plays of Sophocles and Aristophanes. Moreover, the philosophical works of Plato and Cicero have shaped the course of Western thought, influencing not only subsequent philosophers but also the development of political and ethical theory.

This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the major literary genres in classical Greek and Latin literature, exploring their characteristics, themes, and significance within their historical contexts. By examining key works from authors such as Homer, Sophocles, Aristophanes, Virgil, and Cicero, this article seeks to demonstrate the enduring relevance of classical literary genres and their influence on the development of Western literary and intellectual traditions. Through a detailed exploration of these genres, we will better understand how they helped shape the cultural and philosophical foundations of the ancient world and continue to resonate in the literature and thought of today.

METHODS

A comparative literary analysis approach was adopted to explore the major genres of classical Greek and Latin literature. The study focused on key representative works from Greek and Roman authors, each a defining example of its respective genre. Primary sources included:

- Epic Poetry: Homer's The Iliad and The Odyssey, and Virgil's Aeneid.
- Tragedy: Sophocles' Oedipus Rex and Euripides' Medea.
- Comedy: Aristophanes' Lysistrata and Plautus' The Menaechmi.
- Lyric Poetry: Pindar's odes and Horace's Odes.
- Philosophical Works: Plato's Republic and Cicero's De Officiis.

Secondary sources, including historical commentaries, scholarly articles, and critical essays, were used to provide historical and cultural context and to further explore the influence of these genres. Each genre was analyzed in terms of its thematic content, stylistic features, and its reflection of societal values in ancient Greece and Rome.

RESULTS

Epic Poetry

Epic poetry in both Greek and Latin traditions primarily revolves around grand narratives that celebrate heroic deeds, often against the backdrop of war or divine intervention. Homer's The Iliad and The Odyssey set the model for Greek epic poetry, focusing on themes of heroism, fate, and the intervention of gods. The Iliad is a meditation on rage, honor, and mortality, set during the Trojan War, while The Odyssey portrays Odysseus' long journey home, symbolizing human perseverance and the search for identity.

Roman epic poetry, particularly Virgil's Aeneid, reinterprets these themes within the context of Rome's rise to power. Virgil's work connects Roman history with the mythical past, aligning Roman identity with the heroism of Aeneas, the Trojan prince. The Aeneid serves both as a glorification of Rome and a national epic that imbues the rise of the Roman Empire with divine sanction and heroic qualities.

Tragedy

Greek tragedy, epitomized by playwrights such as Sophocles and Euripides, explores the limitations of human agency and the inevitability of fate. In Oedipus Rex, Sophocles examines the theme of self-destruction caused by an individual's inability to escape destiny, while Euripides' Medea delves into the emotional and psychological torment of a woman wronged, showcasing the destructive power of vengeance.

The structure of Greek tragedy, which included a chorus and heightened dialogue, conveyed profound ethical dilemmas and social critiques, often reflecting the tension between individual desires and societal expectations.

Roman tragedies, often influenced by Greek

predecessors, evolved into a more rhetorical and moralistic form. Roman playwrights such as Seneca created tragedies that emphasized stoic philosophy, exploring themes of self-control and the moral consequences of unchecked passion.

Comedy

Greek comedy, particularly the plays of Aristophanes, was characterized by sharp social criticism, humor, and political satire. Lysistrata, for example, uses humor and absurdity to criticize the Peloponnesian War and the role of women in ancient society, while The Clouds satirizes intellectual trends in Athens. Aristophanic comedy employed exaggerated situations, puns, and slapstick to both entertain and provoke thought on civic and philosophical issues.

Roman comedy, as seen in the works of Plautus, maintained many of the comedic conventions of Greek drama but was often more concerned with domestic and everyday life. The Menaechmi is an example of mistaken identities and humorous misunderstandings, a feature that was further developed into the comedic traditions of later European theater.

Lyric Poetry

Greek lyric poetry, exemplified by poets like Pindar, often expressed personal emotions and the human connection to divine forces. Pindar's victory odes celebrate athletic achievements, invoking the gods and offering moral lessons to both victors and audiences. Lyric poetry, with its musical and personal tone, allowed poets to explore individual emotions, divine favor, and the fleeting nature of success.

Roman lyric poetry, most notably through the works of Horace, similarly blended personal reflection with social commentary. Horace's Odes provide insights into the pleasures and moral responsibilities of Roman life, often combining philosophical reflection with the contemplation of love, friendship, and the pursuit of moderation.

Philosophical Works

Philosophy in both Greek and Latin literature sought to understand the nature of the universe, human existence, and morality. Plato's Republic introduces a vision of a just society governed by philosopher-kings, while Cicero's De Officiis explores the concept of duty and ethics within the Roman Republic. Both philosophers address the intersection of individual behavior, social responsibility, and the broader cosmos, laying the intellectual groundwork for later Western thought.

DISCUSSION

The genres of classical Greek and Latin literature are deeply interwoven with the cultural, political, and

intellectual developments of their times. Each genre—epic, tragedy, comedy, lyric poetry, and philosophy—served distinct functions, from shaping national identity to addressing societal concerns or providing personal reflections on the human condition. The influence of these genres extends far beyond the classical period, with many modern literary forms and themes directly stemming from ancient traditions.

Epic poetry, for instance, continues to serve as a vehicle for nationalistic and heroic narratives, while tragedy remains an important genre for exploring human suffering and moral dilemmas. Comedy's ability to critique society through humor and absurdity is still evident in modern satire and political comedy. Lyric poetry's emphasis on personal expression and the exploration of human emotion has shaped both modern poetry and song lyrics. Furthermore, the philosophical writings of ancient thinkers laid the foundation for Western ethical and political theory, continuing to influence contemporary thought.

This study also highlights the importance of genre as a tool for understanding ancient Greek and Roman values. By examining the structure and themes of these literary genres, modern scholars can gain insight into the priorities and concerns of ancient societies. Understanding these genres helps illuminate how ancient authors used literature to engage with and influence their audiences, and how these works continue to resonate in modern literary traditions.

The analysis of literary genres in classical Greek and Latin literature offers a comprehensive understanding of how these works not only shaped the ancient world but also set the groundwork for Western literary traditions. Through genres such as epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, lyric poetry, and philosophical discourse, Greek and Latin authors explored profound themes related to human existence, politics, morality, and the divine. These genres were not just artistic expressions but also crucial tools for engaging with the central questions of life, society, and the cosmos. The continued influence of these genres in contemporary literature and philosophy underscores their significance and enduring relevance.

Epic Poetry: The Foundation of Heroism and Identity

Epic poetry, with its focus on grand narratives of heroism, divine intervention, and the founding of nations, was one of the most important genres in both Greek and Latin literature. The works of Homer, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, are iconic in their depiction of the Greek heroic code, exploring themes such as honor, fate, and the wrath of gods. *The Iliad*, set during the Trojan War, explores the destructive power of rage, particularly through the character of Achilles. The epic

deals with themes of pride, mortality, and the consequences of individual actions on the broader world. Similarly, *The Odyssey* focuses on Odysseus' long journey home, a tale of perseverance, cleverness, and personal transformation, revealing the human desire for homecoming and identity.

For the Greeks, these epic poems were more than just stories; they represented the ideal qualities of a hero—courage, loyalty, and the ability to overcome adversity. These poems also conveyed the message that human beings, despite their noble qualities, were ultimately subject to the whims of the gods and fate. This interplay between human agency and divine will has been a fundamental theme of epic poetry, setting the stage for later epics in other cultures.

Roman epic poetry, especially Virgil's *Aeneid*, continued the tradition of epic storytelling but with a distinct shift in focus. While Virgil borrows from the Homeric tradition, his work reinterprets these themes through the lens of Roman identity and the glorification of the Roman Empire. The *Aeneid* is not only the story of Aeneas's journey from Troy to Italy but also a narrative that connects Rome's founding with divine destiny. Through Aeneas, Virgil creates a hero who embodies Roman values: duty, sacrifice, and a commitment to a higher purpose. The theme of *pietas* (duty to family, country, and gods) is central to the *Aeneid*, highlighting a Roman worldview in which the personal is subordinated to the needs of the state.

The continuing appeal of epic poetry lies in its exploration of universal themes: the individual's struggle against fate, the formation of national identity, and the heroic ideals that persist through history. The *Aeneid* influenced later epic narratives, including works such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which, while distinct in their content and cultural context, carry forward the tradition of using epic form to explore human virtues, divine justice, and the hero's journey.

Tragedy: Confronting Human Limitations and Fate

Greek tragedy, with its roots in religious rituals and festivals, is one of the most powerful genres for exploring the complexities of human existence. Tragedies by playwrights such as Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus tackle themes of fate, guilt, suffering, and moral dilemmas. Tragedy's structure, with its use of dramatic irony, catharsis, and chorus, allows for the examination of moral and existential questions in a heightened, almost ritualistic context. The tragic heroes in these plays are often noble figures who fall victim to their own flaws or the will of the gods, offering profound insights into the limits of human agency and the inevitability of suffering.

Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* remains one of the most significant tragedies in Western literature. The play presents a king who unknowingly fulfills a prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother, and in doing so, it explores the destructive power of fate and the human desire for knowledge. The tragedy lies in Oedipus's quest for truth, which leads to his downfall—a powerful meditation on the dangers of hubris and the human inability to escape destiny. Euripides' *Medea*, in contrast, presents a female protagonist whose intense emotional reaction to betrayal leads to horrific acts of vengeance. Through *Medea's* actions, Euripides examines the destructive consequences of unchecked passion and the tension between personal desire and moral duty.

Roman tragedies, often heavily influenced by Greek predecessors, took a more rhetorical and moralistic tone. Seneca, a prominent Roman playwright and Stoic philosopher, adapted Greek tragedies for a Roman audience, focusing on themes of vengeance, power, and Stoic virtue. In his tragedies, such as *Thyestes* and *Phaedra*, Seneca emphasized the internal turmoil of characters who are torn between their emotions and their desire for control. Roman tragedy's emphasis on moral dilemmas and ethical reflection continues to resonate in modern drama and literature, where tragic heroes often grapple with the consequences of their actions.

Greek and Roman tragedies, through their exploration of human suffering and moral ambiguity, challenge audiences to reflect on the complexities of fate, responsibility, and justice. These themes remain central in modern works of literature, where tragedy is often used to explore the darker aspects of human nature and the limits of personal agency.

Comedy: Satire, Social Critique, and Humor

While tragedy engaged with the darker sides of human experience, comedy offered a lighter, often more satirical view of society. Greek comedy, particularly the works of Aristophanes, was a vehicle for political and social critique, using humor, absurdity, and farce to address serious issues such as war, social justice, and the role of intellectuals. Aristophanes' plays, such as *Lysistrata* and *The Clouds*, blend slapstick with sharp social commentary, creating a space where the established order could be mocked and challenged.

Lysistrata, a comedy about women withholding sex to end the Peloponnesian War, uses humor to criticize the ongoing conflict and the role of men in perpetuating war. Similarly, *The Clouds* satirizes the intellectual trends of Athens, particularly the Sophists, by portraying the character of Socrates as a misguided teacher of absurd reasoning. The exaggeration and

caricature in Aristophanes' comedies make serious political and social commentary more accessible and engaging, while also serving as a release valve for the frustrations of Athenian society.

Roman comedy, as exemplified by Plautus and Terence, maintained many of the conventions of Greek comedy but was more focused on everyday life, particularly domestic situations. Plautus' *The Menaechmi* revolves around the humorous confusion caused by mistaken identities, a theme that is still prevalent in modern comedic literature and film. Roman comedy also often used stock characters such as the clever servant or the miserly father, providing a humorous critique of Roman social structures and values.

The enduring appeal of comedy lies in its ability to blend entertainment with social critique. While Greek and Roman comedies often used humor to critique political and societal issues, modern comedy continues this tradition, using satire and farce to comment on contemporary problems and human nature.

Lyric Poetry: Personal Expression and Emotional Depth

Lyric poetry, which focuses on personal expression and emotional depth, was a highly significant genre in both Greek and Roman literature. Greek lyric poets like Pindar and Sappho used poetry to express individual emotions, celebrate victories, and explore themes of love, loss, and devotion. Pindar's odes, often written for victors in the ancient Greek games, blend personal achievement with divine approval, celebrating both the individual and the gods who enabled their success. Sappho's work, known for its focus on love and the complexities of human relationships, gives a voice to personal longing and desire, offering an intimate look at the human condition.

Roman lyric poetry, particularly through the works of Horace, continued the Greek tradition of personal reflection but with a distinct Roman flair. Horace's *Odes* explore themes of moderation, the pleasures of life, and the fleeting nature of human existence, combining philosophical reflection with personal emotion. Horace's lyric poetry reflects Roman values of restraint and the importance of living in harmony with nature and society. The personal, emotive quality of lyric poetry continues to influence modern poetry and song lyrics, where individual emotions and experiences are at the forefront of expression.

Philosophical Works: Intellectual Foundations

Finally, the philosophical works of Greek and Latin authors, including Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, provide the intellectual foundations for much of Western thought. Greek philosophers like Plato used dialogue as

a literary form to explore ideas about justice, virtue, knowledge, and the ideal society, as seen in works such as *The Republic*. Plato's dialogues set the stage for centuries of philosophical inquiry and established key concepts that would influence Western philosophy, ethics, and politics.

Roman philosophers, such as Cicero and Seneca, adopted and adapted Greek philosophy for Roman audiences. Cicero's treatises on ethics and politics, such as *De Officiis*, offer reflections on moral duty and the nature of the good life, while Seneca's Stoic writings emphasize the importance of self-control, virtue, and rationality in the face of adversity. These philosophical works continue to shape modern political theory, ethics, and philosophy, demonstrating the lasting impact of classical thought on contemporary intellectual traditions.

The literary genres of classical Greek and Latin literature are rich in diversity and significance, providing profound insights into the cultural, moral, and intellectual landscapes of ancient Greece and Rome. From the grandiose epics of Homer and Virgil to the reflective lyric poetry of Pindar and Horace, and from the morally charged tragedies of Sophocles and Seneca to the socially conscious comedies of Aristophanes and Plautus, these genres offer a nuanced understanding of human nature, society, and the divine. Through their exploration of universal themes—heroism, fate, love, suffering, and virtue—these ancient works continue to influence modern literature, philosophy, and culture. By studying the literary genres of classical Greece and Rome, we gain a deeper appreciation for the timelessness of their insights and their enduring impact on the Western literary and intellectual tradition.

CONCLUSION

The literary genres of classical Greek and Latin literature form the foundation of much of Western literary tradition. Through an exploration of epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, lyric poetry, and philosophical works, this study underscores the enduring influence of ancient literary forms. These genres not only offer rich insights into the cultural and intellectual landscapes of ancient Greece and Rome but also continue to shape contemporary literature, philosophy, and theater. Understanding the complexities and evolution of these genres enhances our appreciation of classical literature's profound impact on the literary canon and its lasting relevance in modern times.

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