

Influence of Romans and Greeks on Western Literature

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Abstract

Each piece of literature contains a plethora of insights into the societal, economic, cultural, and philosophical advancements of its respective era. In addition to the aforementioned evidence, it is noteworthy that the dominant belief system of the era exerts a significant impact on both the utilisation of language and the composition itself. This article will examine the impact of Roman and Greek literature on Western literature, and will provide evidence from literary works to support the thesis. The objective of this scholarly article is to investigate the influence of ancient Greek and Roman civilizations on the development of Western literature. The undeniable impact of ancient Greek and Roman literature on Western literature is a well-established fact. The literary traditions of the aforementioned culture have had a significant influence on the manner in which Western writers approach the art of storytelling, language, and style, spanning from epic poetry to drama. The present study aims to analyse the diverse manners in which Greek and Roman literature have impacted Western literature. This will encompass an exploration of the utilisation of mythology, the evolution of literary genres, and the impact of the Greek and Latin languages on the English language.

Key Words: Literature, Roman and Greek Literature.

Introduction

The ancient civilizations of Greece and Rome are widely acknowledged as the progenitors of Western culture. The enduring influence of their philosophical, political, artistic, and literary contributions has left an indelible mark on Western civilization. The literary works of the Greeks and Romans have had a substantial impact on the development of Western literature. The literature of the Ancient Greeks and Romans continues to be analysed and examined in contemporary times due to its enduring themes, evocative imagery, and refined narrative strategies.

The utilisation of mythology is a prominent example of the profound impact that Greek and Roman literature has had on Western literature. The tales of gods and heroes from Greek mythology have significantly influenced Western literature, as numerous Western writers have sought inspiration from them. The play "A Midsummer Night's Dream" by William Shakespeare incorporates Greek mythology into its narrative, with the inclusion of characters such as Titania, Oberon, and Puck.

The literary genres were significantly influenced by the Greek and Roman literature. "The Iliad," an epic poem from ancient Greece, is widely regarded as the inaugural masterpiece of Western

literature. The epic poem in question laid down the conventions that define the epic genre, including the utilisation of a protagonist who embodies heroic qualities, a vast scope that encompasses grand themes, and a thematic emphasis on mythic elements.

The impact of Greek and Latin language on English is a notable manifestation of the influence of Greek and Roman literature on Western literature. Numerous English terminologies and expressions have their origins in the classical languages of Greek and Latin. Western writers have extensively adopted these languages to produce a refined and cultured form of writing. The etymology of the English term "aesthetic" can be traced back to its Greek counterpart "aisthēsis," which denotes the concept of perception.

The literary process and story forms are influenced by various social, economic, political, cultural, and philosophical advancements. The study of literary works can provide insight into the fundamental factors that shape narratives. Comprehending Early Western Literature can prove to be a formidable task in the absence of cross-referencing with Roman and Greek Literature. The Bible is widely acknowledged as a fundamental component of Western culture and literature due to its comprehensive depiction of various aspects of human existence. According to the Bible, "if people do not know about Christianity, they wouldn't know Western Culture." Due to its focus on everyday existence and individual experiences, it expeditiously emerged as a subject matter in Western narratives. Apart from Christianity, the basis of Early Western Literature is established by the cultures of Rome and Greece. Several prominent figures in the realm of storytelling genres include Homer, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Herodotus, Plato, and Aristotle, who produced renowned literary works across the nation. The influence of Realism on the narrative frameworks of Early Western Literature was significant. Individuals were afforded the opportunity to encounter commonplace depictions of daily life and characters within the narratives. Individuals establish a connection with the fictional personas portrayed in literary works throughout their lifetime. Realism transformed the literary landscape by prioritising the representation of actual, tangible concerns over fanciful or fictional ones. The analysis and comprehension of Early Western Literature necessitates the application of multiple interpretive frameworks, including those derived from Christianity, Roman and Greek literature, and Realism. This is due to the fact that Early Western Literature is a composite of various narratives.

The Bible has played a significant role in shaping Western literature, language, and fine arts. Its texts have had a profound impact on many artists and composers throughout history. Alvin J. Schmidt underscores the significant influence of Christianity in shaping Western Civilization with the aforementioned statements.

“No other religion, philosophy, teaching, nation, movement—whatever—has so changed the world for the better as Christianity has done. Its shortcomings are, nevertheless, heavily outweighed by its benefits to all mankind. (Schmidt)”

Numerous terminologies and expressions derived from the Bible are commonly utilised in the English lexicon. According to Alistair McGrath, a renowned scholar of the Bible, in his work Christian Theology, "Without the King James Bible, there would have been no Paradise Lost, no

Pilgrim's Progress, no Handel's Messiah, no Negro spirituals, and no Gettysburg Address" (McGrath, 12). The Bible has had a profound influence on the works of numerous authors, artists, and musicians throughout history, leading them to create narrative forms that are rooted in its content.

The Scriptures' vocabulary and motifs have permeated a significant portion of literary works, ranging from Dante's to Milton's to Dostoyevsky's. Bunyan's literary work, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, is an allegorical narrative that centres on the theme of individual salvation and is widely regarded as a manual for Christian living. The work is characterised by a lucid narrative style and exhibits the impact of Christianity in its original form. Several prominent authors in the history of Western Civilization, including Chaucer, Shakespeare, Donne, Hawthorne, Melville, Blake, Eliot, and Faulkner, drew inspiration from the Bible, infusing their literary works with Christian perspectives and insights.

In addition to its influence on works of fiction, Christianity also exerts an impact on the realm of play. During the eleventh century, a widely recognised theatrical production known as "*The Visit to Christ's Sepulchre*" was performed with religious themes. The Bible has exerted a significant influence on it, as evidenced by the prevalent use of biblical themes and musical motifs. In addition to the works of renowned intellectuals, historical literature contains a wealth of captivating details regarding individuals whose experiences were transformed by Jesus Christ and whose difficulties had a notable impact on the world. Alvin Schmidt, a renowned philosopher, argues that "to deny the influence of Christianity on Western Civilization is to deny history altogether" (Schmidt, 47). The Western civilization of the past possessed a robust tradition of oral communication, with the majority of literary compositions designed for oral recitation. Epic poetry, exemplified by works such as *Beowulf*, enjoyed widespread popularity during the time period in question. The text contains references to both Christian and Pagan concepts. The perspective on retribution serves as an exemplification of the Pagan concepts. *Beowulf* employs a distinct approach to seeking retribution. If an individual's acquaintance has been subject to homicide, they possess the entitlement to seek retribution. The aforementioned quote from *Beowulf* serves as an illustration of the value placed on avenging one's friend over excessive mourning. Numerous allusions to Christian beliefs are evident. In the poem, Grendel is described as a malevolent adversary upon the revelation of his origin. As per the content of the poem, it is stated that individuals who are related to Cain were cursed by God. The aforementioned statement implies that the poet possessed a certain degree of Christian instruction, given his reference to Grendel as a descendant of Cain, a prominent figure in the Bible. Similar to Jesus, *Beowulf* serves as a saviour. An additional illustration of *Beowulf's* role as a rescuer is evidenced in his confrontation with the dragon. The saga of *Beowulf* showcases a clear manifestation of both Pagan and Christian values, as evidenced by his stance on retribution, his affinity for material wealth, and his position as a deliverer. Furthermore, Goethe's *Faust* represents the amalgamation of religious and Romantic ideals. Despite not being classified as a Christian work, its mystical nature suggests a potential Christian provenance. Upon close examination, the Christian elements present in *Faust* may initially seem ambiguous, yet upon careful analysis, their presence becomes unmistakable. In the literary work *Faust*, the act of

relinquishing the struggle is deemed as the only sin that cannot be pardoned. Early Western Literature contains examples of poetry that present religious arguments. The lengthiest literary work on the subject is "*Christ and Satan*," which chronicles the account of Christ's encounter with Satan over the course of forty days in the wilderness. The *Martyrology* is a form of early prose literature that serves as a source of information on saints and martyrs, with a focus on their anniversaries and feast days as they appear in the church calendar.

Poets such as Edmund Spenser and John Milton produced literary works that demonstrated an increasing inclination towards comprehending Christian concepts. Edmund Spenser's work, *The Faerie Queen*, presents a metaphorical representation of the Tudor Dynasty. Similarly, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* depicts the fall of mankind from paradise. Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare created works based on biblical themes such as life, death, and history.

The literature of ancient Greece and Rome had a significant impact on the development of Early Western literature. Notwithstanding the significant modifications in the English language, most of the literary works referenced the Latin tongue and a few of the traditional Roman expressions. The Greeks are credited with the development of various narrative styles, including tragedy, comedy, epic, and romance, which have had a significant impact on a vast number of individuals. Throughout the pre-classical, classical, Hellenistic-Roman, and Byzantine eras, the Greeks produced a multitude of literary and artistic works that were focused on themes such as love, daily life, and religion. The literary themes and narrative structures of these characters had a significant influence on the Romans, who incorporated and synthesised them into their own literary works. Throughout the period known as the Dark Ages, a significant proportion of the European population lacked the ability to read and write. Individuals who possess the ability to comprehend and produce written language have made noteworthy advancements in Western literary works by amalgamating Christian concepts with figures from Greek and Roman mythology. Narratives from the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations, as well as those originating from Old English, were a source of amusement for individuals. The individuals recounted popular narratives from those societies, including the assassination of Caesar and the fate of Oedipus. The cultural heritage of ancient Greece provides Western literature with an opportunity to elucidate the concepts of tragedy and comedy. It is true that a significant portion of Western literature has been influenced by and modelled after the literary works of ancient Greek and Roman civilizations. Mathematician Alfred North Whitehead once claimed that all philosophy is but a footnote to Plato. In addition to these, Western Literature gained a comprehensive understanding of the essence of epic poetry through the works of Homer, the renowned author of the 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey'. The 'Iliad' can be classified as a work of pure tragedy, while the 'Odyssey' exhibits elements of both tragedy and comedy, resulting in a tragicomic tone. Both of these works were influenced by narratives from antiquity. The language utilised in the story is designed to effectively communicate with the intended audience, employing a style that is clear, concise, and engaging. Hesiod, a prominent poet of ancient Greece, exerted a significant influence on the narrative structures of the Western literary tradition. The author made a significant contribution to the incorporation of mundane subjects in literary works by depicting the impoverished standard of living prevalent in the nation. The ancient Greeks regarded

the literary works of Homer and Hesiod as a form of scripture that imparted essential wisdom. Homer's literary works conveyed knowledge about the heroic past, while Hesiod's literary works imparted knowledge about the mundane aspects of daily existence. Sappho and Pindar were highly esteemed as prominent figures in the realm of poetry, inspiring countless individuals to emulate their literary style. Sappho's literary works were characterised by a focus on personal struggles, with a notable emphasis on the significance of the individual. Pindar is recognised as a prominent figure in Western literature due to his representation of the shift from the pre-classical to the classical era. The literary works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, renowned Greek authors, have endured over an extended period. Aeschylus is renowned for his trilogies, notably the 'Oresteia,' 'Choephoroi,' and 'Eumenides'. Euripides demonstrated a commitment to realism in his dramatic works by featuring depictions of real-life individuals, rather than relying solely on fictional characters. Aristophanes, Menander, Plautus, and Terence employed fictitious personages in their literary compositions to advance the genre of comedy as a novel narrative form and revolutionise the public's outlook on Euripides. Herodotus and Thucydides are recognised as the Western historians who effectively utilised prose within the realm of Western literature. The 'History of the Peloponnesian War' authored by Hucydides is considered a significant historical document in the realm of Early Western literature. Moreover, the rhetorical endeavours of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were of exceptional quality and had a profound impact on the development of Western civilization. The demise of Aristotle marked the irreversible culmination of the classical era. Virgil, a prominent Roman poet, composed various literary works such as poetic plays, minor epics, and lyric poetry. One of his most notable works is the 'Aeneid'. The *Divine Comedy* authored by Dante Alighieri showcases a number of significant figures from Western literature, serving as a source of inspiration for numerous writers such as Giovanni Boccaccio, Geoffrey Chaucer, John Milton, William Blake, Victor Hugo, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, and Ezra Pound. Following the fall of Constantinople to the Turks, Greek cultural and literary production, along with the broader scope of national life, experienced a prolonged period of stagnation. Comprehending Western literary narrative necessitates the inclusion of the Greeks and Romans, to state it succinctly.

Thirdly, the representation of Realism brought about a transformation in the narrative structures of Western literature. Realism, despite its contemporary connotation, can be traced back to the inception of human civilization. The Bible contains intricate depictions of the everyday aspects of human existence. Consequently, numerous writers during that era utilised common individuals such as peasants, slaves, and merchants in prominent settings such as households, shops, fields, and stores in their literary compositions. The New Testament portrays the mundane aspects of life by presenting them from the perspectives of both genders. The emergence of realism brought about a shift in the Western mindset, as individuals began to perceive the characters and occurrences depicted in the Bible as more authentic and remarkable in comparison to the fabricated constructs of Greek or Roman literature. Some works of Greek and Roman culture exhibit distinct narrative representations of reality. In Homer's epic poem, the character of Odysseus is depicted as observing and taking note of the various elements present in the room, including the decorative features, the individuals present, and a notable scar on his own leg. Homer's meticulous attention to detail can be interpreted as an appreciation for realism in storytelling. The concept of realism was initially

constrained as the characters depicted in literary works did not undergo any significant development. Odysseus is a figure who is known to have existed both prior to and subsequent to his expedition. The primary objective of his narrative is to achieve dulceet utility, which is to say that art should both entertain and educate. Additionally, the author aims to immerse the reader in his world. Homer's literary work delves into the concept of the individual and self, rather than focusing on idealised notions, within the framework of a realistic context. Narrative forms such as comedy and tragedy were favoured in Greek and Roman literature as a means of depicting reality. Solely comedic productions showcased commonplace scenarios and personas. Aristocratic individuals opted to portray their lavish lifestyles through the selection of tragic themes. The addition of Chivalric or Romantic literature contributed to the realistic foundation of Western literature. They made a significant contribution to the widespread culture of love. Despite its emphasis on individualism over reality, Romance can only be effectively conveyed within a realistic context that allows for the persuasive power of individuals to be demonstrated. Consequently, the concept of individuality cannot be dissociated from realism. Cervantes' *Don Quixote* delves into the portrayal of the common individual within a meticulously structured society. The literary work of *Don Quixote* motivates its readers to engage in imaginative visualisation following their exposure to the contrived nature of chivalric customs, thereby contributing to a more authentic portrayal of humanity. The authors Dostoyevsky, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce, despite their focus on the irrational facet of human nature, have made noteworthy contributions to the field of psychological realism. The emphasis on internal rather than external facts was highlighted in tales due to their significant contributions. The novel *Ulysses*, authored by James Joyce, explores the intricacies of human consciousness, including its irrational aspects, and is widely regarded as a representation of the complexities of the human mind. Boccaccio's *TheDecameron* employs realistic characters and narrative to allude to the vividness of human existence. The act of personalising characters is achieved by the reader's perception of their real-life surroundings and experiences. In his analysis of Boccaccio's impact on realistic writing in Western culture, John Dwyer asserts that the characters in Boccaccio's works exist solely within the earthly realm, as evidenced by his statement, "live on earth, and only on earth" (Dwyer, 17). Eric Auerbach characterises realism in Western literature as the imitation of everyday existence. The author's objective is evident in the title of his literary work, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. The author conducts an extensive analysis of various literary works, spanning from the ancient epic poem of Homer to the modernist writings of Virginia Woolf, in order to discern their reflection of everyday existence.

In summary, Western Literature and its narrative structures have undergone numerous adaptations throughout history due to rapid societal and global changes. The aforementioned modifications prompted individuals to modify their literary consumption patterns. The individuals in question engaged in a pattern of alternating between the consumption of fictional narratives as a means of escapism from external stressors, and the consumption of realistic genres as a means of distancing themselves from the harshness of reality. The lives and literary structures of the individuals in question were impacted by significant factors, including but not limited to Christianity, Greek and Roman literature, and realism. The precise cause of these influences is unclear. These individuals explored distinct facets during particular periods by delving into the fundamental components of

great works. The Early Western Literature is inextricably linked to the narrative forms that were shaped by influential personalities. To conclude, the influence of the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations on Western literature has been significant. The literary traditions of this particular culture have had a significant impact on the evolution of literary genres, the incorporation of mythology, and the utilisation of language within Western literature. The enduring and vibrant themes of Greek and Roman literature persist in contemporary scholarship and appreciation.

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