

# 西方文学

## 纲要及选读

左金梅 主编

A Brief Introduction  
and Selected Readings  
to Western Literature

青岛海洋大学出版社

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and Selected Readings to  
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## Introduction

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The Western literature has gone through seven phases since its beginning, which includes the Ancient World, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, Neo-classicism, Realism, Romanticism, and Modernism.

The Ancient World began from the eighth century, B.C. and ended at the fifth century, A.D. Its literature contains two aspects — the Biblical and the classical, which have exerted the greatest influence on the Western literature. The *Bible* is a collection of religious writing comprising two parts: the *Old Testament* and the *New Testament*. The former is about God and the laws of God; the latter, the doctrine of Jesus Christ. The classical mainly refers to the ancient Greco-Roman literature. The achievement of Greek literature lies in its poetry and drama. The great poet, Homer, left us two great epics — the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. The *Iliad* deals

with the war against the city of Troy. The heroes are Hektor on the Trojan side and Achilles and Odysseus on the Greek. In the final battle, Hektor was killed by Achilles and Troy was burned by the Greeks. The *Odyssey* deals with the return of Odysseus after the Trojan war to his home island of Ithaca. It describes many adventures Odysseus runs into on his sea voyage and how he is finally reunited with his faithful wife Penelope. The greatest Greek playwrights of tragedy are Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and the greatest playwright of comedy is Aristophanes. Among the most renowned Greek tragedies are Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*.

The greatest of Latin poets is Virgil. He wrote the great epic, the *Aeneid*. It tells the story of Aeneas, one of the princes of Troy, who escaped from the burning city when it fell to the Greeks, to carry on the Trojan cause in a new place, Rome. Aeneas stood at the head of a race of people who were to found first the Roman Republic and then the Roman Empire. He was a truly tragic hero because to fulfill his historic mission he had to sacrifice his own happiness. With the Greco-Roman achievements in literary creation emerged a number of forerunners of western literary criticism and theory, of whom Plato, Aristotle, Horace and Longinus are the greatest.

The Classical literature ended with the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century, and then the Western literature entered the phase of the Middle Ages, which lasted till the fourteenth century. During the Medieval times, there was no central government to keep the order. The only organization that seemed to unite Europe was the Christian Church. Christianity took the lead in politics, law, art, and learning for hundreds of years. Religion

shaped people's lives.

The medieval literature can be divided into three categories — religious writings, romance, and vernacular writings. The greatest achievement of religious literature was made by the greatest Italian poet, Dante. His masterpiece, the *Divine Comedy*, is the greatest Christian poem with a profound vision of the Medieval Christian world. It expresses humanistic ideas which foreshadowed the spirit of the Renaissance. With regard to romance, the most well-known are the adventures of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table. The vernacular literature of this time tends to be realistic and satirical. The greatest works of this kind are Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. *Decameron* is a collection of about one hundred tales told by seven young ladies and three younger gentle men on their way to escape the Black Death of 1348. The tales are witty, licentious, full of praises of true love and wisdom and also satire on the hypocrisy of the priest and the aristocratic. *The Canterbury Tales* is also a collection of tales, which were told by thirty pilgrims on their way to the saint place, Canterbury. The tales are a true-to-life picture of the medieval England, in which Chaucer sang of man's energy, intellect, quick wit, and love of life, and at the same time, Chaucer exposed and satirized the evils of his time such as the corruption of the church.

Against the theology of the Middle Ages arose the intellectual movement, Renaissance, which sprang first in Italy in the fourteenth century and gradually spread all over Europe. The movement had two striking features. One was the thirsting curiosity for classical literature, and the other was the keen interest in human beauty and human activities, which is in sharp contrast with



Medieval theology. The greatest novel of this period is Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, which is a parody satirizing a very popular type of literature, the romance of chivalry. Don Quixote is a poor country gentleman who has read too many chivalric romances. He, together with another peasant, sets forth on a series of adventures, which are put against the reality of the seventeenth century Spain. Don Quixote is an idealist. When his ideals are in conflict with reality and could not be realized, the idealist turns into an absurd, comic character. The other writers giving full expressions to the humanist ideals of the Renaissance include Shakespeare and Marlowe (playwrights), Bacon and More (essayists), and Spenser and Milton (poets). The literary criticism and theory of the Renaissance is the summation of the views and creations of these great Renaissance writers. The outstanding British critic of this period is Sir Philip Sidney.

The Renaissance is romantic in nature, for it stresses the liberation of the human mind. To restrain the liberal mind arose a new literary movement, Neo classicism, which began in France in the late seventeenth century and flourished in other European countries in the mid-eighteenth century. Often in contrast with Realism and Romanticism, Neoclassicism places emphasis upon qualities of the classical literature: clear, direct, simple expressions of ideas in balanced and well-proportioned form; restraint of motion and passion; an ability to think and to communicate objectively rather than subjectively. These qualities are apparent in the works of Moliere, the best representative dramatist of French classical comedies, and of Pope, the greatest English poet and critic of classicism.

As a reaction to the restraints and rules imposed by classicists, Romanticism came into being in the late eighteenth century. Romanticists looked to the Middle Ages and emphasized individual freedom, pure sentiments and ideal beauty. Romanticism brought forth a full flowering of literary talents. The leading Romantic writers include Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott, Byron, Shelly, and Keats in England; Goethe and Schiller in Germany; Hugo and Sand in France; and Irving, Whitman, Poe, Emerson, and Hawthorne in America. Most of these writers also contribute to literary criticism.

Against the sentimentality of Romanticism emerged Realism, which began in France in the 1850's and prevailed in Europe and the United States until the early years of the twentieth century. Realism centered in the novel and put emphasis on fidelity to actual experience. At the end of the nineteenth century, Realism developed into Naturalism, which applied determinism to literature and held that the fate of human beings were determined by environment and heredity. The representative realistic writers are Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, Maupassant in France; Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy in Russia; Dickens, Hardy in England; Mark Twain, Henry James, and Lowells in the United States. The renowned realistic dramatists are Shaw in England, and Ibsen in Norway. Among these writers, those who can be also regarded as great critics are Balzac, Tolstoy, and Henry James.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Western literature entered the phase of Modernism. Modernism, as a literary movement, is a very complicated term to define. It has been made up of many facets including surrealism, symbolism, existentialism,

expressionism, stream of consciousness, Black Humor, Theatre of the Absurd, and other minor trends.

Symbolism rose in the late nineteenth century as opposed to realism. Symbolists of this era tried to suggest life through the use of symbols and images. Ezra Pound and Yeats are among the representatives of symbolism.

Surrealism sprang up in France at the end of World War I. Influenced by Freudianism and horrified by the brutality of war, it stresses the subconscious or the nonrational aspects of man's existence. Writers of this school tend to present imagery in disorderly array, much like the random sequence of events or recollections experienced in dreams.

Existentialism is normally applied to writings that emphasize man's responsibility for forming his own nature and stress the prime importance of personal decisions, personal freedom, and personal goals. The most important existentialist of the century is Sartre, French philosopher and writer, whose principal theory is that life has no meaning and purpose.

Expressionism appeared at the beginning of the 20th century and reached its climax in Germany and the United States in the 1930s. It stresses the subjective, intuitive and conscious aspects of man, and presents reality in symbolism, abstraction, or even distortion. The expressionistic tendency is notable in the plays of Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams.

Stream of consciousness is a manner of writing in which the character's perceptions and thoughts are presented as occurring in random form. This method of writing was employed by such writers as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf.

Black Humor is a term used to refer to some Western, especially American post World War II writers. Black Humor is a kind of desperate humor. It is the laughter at tragic things. To black humorists, the world is meaningless; man's fate is decided by incomprehensible powers; we can't do anything about it, and there we may as well laugh. Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* has been considered the major work of black humor.

The Theatre of the Absurd refers to the works of some European, particularly French, playwrights of the 1950's and 1960's. In their plays, these playwrights attempted to convey the idea that human existence is purposeless and meaningless, and that in this world man feels constantly bewildered, troubled and threatened. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* has been remembered as one of the most famous Absurd drama.

## Chapter I The Ancient World

### I. *Historical Introduction*

The ancient world represents the most significant area and period of ancient man's development. The area is the Mediterranean basin, and the period the twelve hundreds from roughly 500 B. C. to A. D. 400. In this place and time ancient man laid the intellectual and religious foundations of the modern Western outlook. The literature of the ancient world was written in three languages — Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. The peoples who spoke these languages created their civilizations independently in place and time, but the development of the Mediterranean area into one economic and political unit brought these civilizations into contact with each other and produced a fusion of their typical attitudes which has become the basis of all subsequent Western thought.

The territory of the Hebrews was Palestine which was of no particular strategic importance. In their period of independence, from their beginning as a pastoral tribe to their high point as a kingdom with a splendid capital in Jerusalem, the Hebrews achieved little of note in the military spheres and their later history was a bitter and unsuccessful struggle for freedom against a series of foreign masters — Babylonian, Greek, and Roman. They left no drama nor epic poetry but religious literature, probably written down between the eighth and second centuries B. C. , which was

later called the *Old Testament*.

Greek literature begins with two masterpieces the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which were created by the blind poet Homer on the basis of the legends passed down by many generations of singers before him. The production of the two epics are roughly dated between the eleventh and ninth centuries B. C., the time when the clan system began to disintegrate and the slavery was on its way to come in Greek society. In the seventh and sixth centuries B. C., Greece entered the slave society. With the increasing conflict between commercial and aristocratic slave owners arose the classical Greek tragedy, with the three great tragedians — Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides taking the lead. At the same time, Greek comedy came into being. The only comic poet of the fifth century whose work has survived is Aristophanes. As a result of the political and economical development and the great literary achievements in poetry and drama, the ancient Greek literary criticism prospered. The greatest Ancient Greek literary critics are Plato and Aristotle, who opened the history of Western literary criticism.

The Romans looked to Greek models for their literature. Greek literature began before the Greeks as a people had any political importance. The Romans, on the other hand, had conquered half the world before they began to write. They began to do so only when, in the third century B. C., they dominated Greece and discovered Greek literature. The first real example of a literary work in Latin is a translation of Homer's *Odyssey*. In spite of the imitation, the finest Roman accomplishments in literature, as in other aspects of art and life, were seen in the reign of the first of Rome's emperors, Augustus Caesar (27B.C. — 14A.D.). The great

works of the Augustan Age was Virgil's *Aeneid*, Horace's satirical lyrics, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and the *New Testament*. The critical works, based on these literary creations, are Horace's "The Art of Poetry" and Longinus' "On the Sublime."

## II. Literary Giants and Works

*Bible* is a collection of writings known as the *Holy Scriptures*, the sacred writings of the Christian religion. Of the two chief parts, the *Old Testament* consists of the sacred writings of the ancient Hebrews, and the *New Testament* of writings of the early Christian period. The *Old Testament*, written in ancient Hebrew at various times in the pre-Christian era, includes four collections — *The Law*, *The History*, *The Writings*, and *The Prophets*, dealing with God's creations, ancient Jewish legends, law and doctrines. The *New Testament*, written in the Greek dialect of Mediterranean countries at the time of Christ, includes *The Gospel*, *The Letters*, and *The Revelation*, concerning Jesus Christ's birth, youth, teachings, trial and crucifixion. The *Bible* is partly in prose and partly in verse and exploits various literary types — short story, biographical narrative, love lyric, battle ode, epigram, psalm, elegy, letter, and dramatic philosophical poem. The *Bible* is the most quoted, the most influential and powerful book of all literature. Great authors commonly show a familiarity with it.

The *Iliad* describes the events of a few weeks in the ten-year siege of Troy. The war was fought by the Akhaians against the Trojans for the recovery of Helen, the wife of the Akhaian chieftain Menelaos, who had been taken away by the Prince of Troy. The

particular subject of the poem is the anger of Achilles, the bravest of the Akhaian chieftains encamped outside the city. Achilles is a man who lives by and for violence, who is creative and alive only in violent action. The great champion of the Trojans is Hektor, who fights bravely, but reluctantly. War, for him, is a necessary evil, and he thinks nostalgically of the peaceful past, though he has little hope of peace to come. The two heroes stand for the two poles of the human condition, war and peace, with their corresponding aspects of human nature, the destructive and the creative. The poem begins with Achilles' anger and ends with Hektor's funeral.

The *Odyssey* is concerned with the peace which followed the war, and in particular with the return of the heroes who survived. Its subject is the long drawn-out return of one of the heroes, Odysseus, who had come farther than most (all the way from western Greece) and who was destined to spend ten years' wandering in unknown seas before he returned to his rocky kingdom. Odysseus' voyage home, full of trials of physical obstacles and temptations, is the symbol of life, for which Odysseus is struggling. Odysseus' outstanding quality is a probing and versatile intelligence, which, combined with long experience, keeps him safe and alive through the trials and dangers of twenty years of war and seafaring. He finds in the end the home and peace he has fought for, his wife faithful, a son worthy of his name ready to succeed him, and the knowledge that the death which must come at last will be gentle.

*Prometheus Bound* is one of Aeschylus' greatest tragedies. It deals with Prometheus' defiance against tyranny and his love of



mankind. According to Greek myth, Prometheus stole fire from heaven and taught men how to use it. For this he was punished by Zeus, the supreme god, who chained him to a rock on Mt. Caucasus, where during the daytime a vulture fed on his liver, which was restored each succeeding night. The figure of Prometheus has been symbolic of those noble-hearted who devote themselves to the good of mankind and suffer great pains at the hands of tyrants.

*Oedipus Rex* is Sophocles' masterpiece of tragedy. Here Sophocles used for his tragedy a well-known legendary story handed down from generation to generation. Oedipus is the son of the king and queen of Thebes. Before his birth, Apollo has predicted that he will kill his father and marry his mother. When he is born, his parents have their shepherd desert him in a deep valley. But out of compassion, the shepherd gives the boy to another shepherd in another kingdom, in which Oedipus becomes the foster son of the king and queen. When he grows up, Oedipus learns his dreadful fate from Apollo's prediction and leaves his foster parents. On his way, he meets with a group of strangers and kills one of them, who is none other than his original father. Then he reaches Thebes, where he is made king for his bravery of getting rid of the Sphinx and marries the ex-king's wife, his mother. When the truth is made known, Oedipus, in remorse, puts out his eyes and his mother commits suicide. Through the tragedy of Oedipus, the playwright implies the inadequacy of the human intellect and gives a warning that there is a power in the universe which humanity cannot control, nor even fully understand.

*Medea*, one of Euripides masterpieces, was produced in 431,