



A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO WESTERN LITERATURE

西方文学



图书在版编目(CIP)数据

西方文学=A Brief Introduction to Western Literature/左金梅主编;一修订本. 一青岛:中国海洋大学出版社,2006.9

ISBN 7-81067-877-9

I.西··· II. 左··· III. 文学史-西方国家-高等学校-教材-英语 IV. I109

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(2006)第 049473 号

西方文学(修订版)

左金梅 主编

出版发行 中国海洋大学出版社

社 址 青岛市鱼山路 5 号

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印 制 日照报业印刷有限公司

版 次 2006年9月第1版

印 次 2006年9月第1次印刷

开 本 850 mm×1 168 mm 1/32

印 张 12.75

字 数 420 千字

定 价 25.00元

前言

近些年来我国高等院校英语专业陆续开设了西方文学方面的新课程,但到目前为止有关方面英文版本的教材还很少。本书是根据作者近些年从事西方文学教学的经验和学生的实际需要、基于2001年出版的《西方文学纲要及选读》而修订的一本专业教材。

本书分古代、中世纪、文艺复兴、古典主义、浪漫主义、现实主义和自然主义、现代主义七部分,每部分又分为历史背景、文学流派及特点、杰出代表人物及作品、经典作品选读和思考题,系统全面地简述了西方文学的发生、发展历史,并重点概述了现代主义和后现代主义的各个分流派:象征主义、未来主义、表现主义、存在主义、荒诞派戏剧、超现实主义、意识流、黑色幽默、新小说、新现实主义。内容翔实新颖,条理层次分明,重点突出,语言通俗易懂,便于学生在较短的时间内系统地掌握西方文学方面的知识。

《西方文学》与本人主编的《美国文学》、《英国文学》和《当代西方文论》已成为有关西方文学方面的比较完整的系列教材,在我校英语专业已使用过数届,并被列为我校英语专业外国语言学和英语语言文学研究生入学考试的参考书,也有其他兄弟院校开始陆续使用。

左全梅 2006年8月8日

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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 8th century B C and ended at the 5th 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,

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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 5th century, and then the Western literature entered the phase of the Middle Ages, which lasted till the 14th century. During the Medieval times, there was no central government to keep the order. The only organization that seemed to unite Eu-

rope 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 gentlemen 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 14th 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 are 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 17th century Spain. Don Quixote is an idealist. When his ideals are in conflict with reality and can 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 17th century and flourished in other European countries in the mid-18th 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

Molière, the best representative dramatist of French classical comedies, and of Pope, the greatest English poet and critic of Neo classicism.

As a reaction to the restraints and rules imposed by classicists, Romanticism came into being in the late 18th 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 19th 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 lit-

erature 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, the Theatre of the Absurd, and other minor trends.

Symbolism rose in the late 19th 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 writers after World War []. 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,

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Chapter I The Ancient World

1. 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 is roughly from 500 B C to 400 A D. 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 8th and 2nd centuries B C, which was

later called the Old Testament.

Greek literature began 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 11th and 9th centuries BC, the time when the clan system began to disintegrate and the slavery was on its way to come in Greek society. In the 7th and 6th centuries BC, 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 5th 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 3rd 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, Augusts Caesar (27 B C-14 A D). The great

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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.

2. 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 Western authors commonly show a familiarity with it.

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.