# Greek Drama Study Guide

## Greek Drama

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# Introduction

The art of drama developed in the ancient Greek city-state of Athens in the late sixth century B.C. From the religious chants honoring Dionysus arose the first tragedies, which centered on the gods and Greece's mythical past. In the fifth century, Greek audiences enjoyed the works of four master playwrights; of these, three—Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides—were tragedians. The early works focused on the good and evil that existed simultaneously in the world as well as the other contradictory forces of human nature and the outside world. All three tragic playwrights drew their material from Greek myths and legends; they each brought new developments to the art form. Aeschylus, whose *Oresteia* trilogy examines the common tragic themes of vengeance and justice, brought tragedy to the level of serious literature. Sophocles wrote perhaps the greatest tragic work of all time, *Oedipus the King*. The last great tragedian, Euripides, questioned traditional values and the ultimate power of the gods. In plays such as *Medea* and *Antigone*, Euripides explores the choices that humans make under difficult situations. C. M. Bowra pointed out in his book *Classical Greece* that "Greek tragedy provides no explicit answers for the sufferings of humanity, but it . . . shows how they happen and how they may be borne." Indeed, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* expresses a truly sorrowful course of events and how one man, though his life is devastated, forges a new identity and learns to live with himself. The myth of Orestes, as seen in Aeschylus's *Oresteia* trilogy and Euripides' *Orestes* introduces other major themes in Greek tragedy, namely justice (divine, personal, and communal) and vengeance.

Comedy most likely also developed out of the same religious rituals as tragedy. Aristophanes was the greatest writer of comedies in the early period known as Old Comedy. He used biting satire in plays such as *Birds* and *Lysistrata* to ridicule prominent Athenian figures and current events. Later comedy relied less on satire and mythology and more on human relations among the Greek common people.

Greek drama created an entirely new art form, and over the centuries, the works of these ancient Greek writers have influenced and inspired countless writers, philosophers, musicians, and other artists and thinkers. Greek drama, with its universal themes and situations, continues to hold relevance for modern audiences.

# Themes

## Tragedy

The first forms of Greek drama were tragedies. "The theme of all tragedy is the sadness of life and the universality of evil," wrote noted scholar Paul Roche in *The Orestes Plays of Aeschylus*. "The inference the Greeks drew from this was *not* that life was not worth living, but that because it was worth living the obstacles to it were worth overcoming." Through suffering, the tragic hero is able to learn and grow.

Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were the great Greek tragedians, and they brought distinctive themes and perspectives to their works. Aeschylus transformed tragic drama into great literature. His plays focused on the plights, decisions, and fates of individuals who were intrinsically intertwined with their community and their gods. In Aeschylus' works, gods controlled the actions of mortal men and women. Self-pride caused humans to defy the will of the gods, which led to punishment. A Sophoclean tragedy generally revolved around characters whose "tragic"□or personal□ flaws caused them to suffer. The tragedy climaxed as the main character recognized his or her errors and accepted responsibility and its accompanying punishment. Of the three tragedians, the characters of Sophocles are generally considered to best reflect the true state of human experience. Euripides differed from the earlier playwrights both in his belief that the world operates by chance rather than by the will of gods and in his treatment of his mythic characters as if they were people of his own time. These characters, subject to the same political and social pressures as fifth-century Athenians, were in charge of their own destinies. Their tragic fate arises from their own inability to deal with the difficulties that the gods placed upon them or from their own passions. The tragedies of Euripides often questioned traditional and widely accepted social values.

## Comedy

Comedy was the other major form of Greek drama. Greek comedies often made fun of people, particularly politicians, military leaders, and other prominent figures. Victor Ehrenberg noted in *The People of Aristophanes* that "In no other place or age were men of all classes attacked and ridiculed in public and by name with such freedom." Greek comedies were varied productions, ranging from the intellectual to the bawdy. Some comedies were satirical, some slapstick. They included such devices as verbal play, parody, metaphor, and allegory. Aristophanes, the most noted comic playwright, used satire to make fun of the leaders and institutions of his day. He often placed them in absurd situations, such as the one in the *Birds*, in which the heroes try to build "Cuckoo City," a peaceful community in the sky.

Greek comedy is divided into three periods. Old Comedy□the first phase of ancient Greek comedy□emerged during the fifth century B.C. Primarily known through the work of Aristophanes, it is sometimes referred to as Aristophanic comedy. The high-spirited

satire of public figures and events characterize these plays. Though they are filled with songs, dances, and buffoonery, they also include blatant political criticism as well as commentary on literary and philosophical topics. The plays of Aristophanes parody tragedy. Middle Comedy, dating from the closing years of the fifth century B.C. to nearly the middle of the fourth century B.C., represents the transition from Old Comedy to New Comedy. Comedies from this period made good-humored attacks on classes or character types rather than individuals. The playwright Menander introduced the New Comedy in about 320 B.C. Like Old Comedy, it satirized contemporary Athenian society, but the ridicule was far milder. New Comedy also differed from Old Comedy because it parodied average citizens□fictitious characters from ordinary life□rather than public figures, and it had no supernatural or heroic overtones. The plays of New Comedy often focused on thwarted lovers and concealed identities, and playwrights presented a host of stock characters, such as the cruel father, the clever slave, and the conceited cook.

## Struggle and Rebellion

Greek tragedies all depicted struggles of some sort, most commonly between the state and individuals, between human law and natural law, or between human efforts and preordained fate. In many Greek tragedies, it is the person who rebels against the established order of things who becomes the hero or heroine. Sophocles' *Antigone* depicts some of these struggles. Antigone defies her uncle Creon, the king of Thebes, when she performs burial rites for her brother. In doing so, Antigone elevates the need to follow the laws of the gods, who decree that her brother must be buried, above the laws of Creon, who declared such burial illegal in the case of Antigone's brother, because he brought an army against his home city. As punishment for her disobedience, her uncle sentences her to death. At the end of the play, Creon, who has placed his decree above the command of the gods, is himself punished through the suicides of his wife and son. Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* demonstrates the human effort to escape preordained fate. Oedipus's parents□Laius and Jocasta□attempt to thwart the oracles that tell them their son will murder his father and marry his mother. As the myth and the play bears out, despite their efforts to change fate, Oedipus fulfills this prophecy.

## The Common Man

Both tragedies and comedies dignify the common man. Members of Greek royalty and upper classes create a world filled with adultery, incest, madness, and murder, and it is the shepherds, craftspeople, yeomen farmers, and nurses who provide a stable environment amidst this debauchery. Sophocles and Euripides endowed these secondary characters with common sense and sensitivity. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, for example, the men serving in Creon's guard offer their king advice and even disagree with him. Comedy utilized the common man in a different way than tragedy did. Comic writers introduced regular characters, such as the orphan, the young lover, and the master of the house as protagonists instead of relying solely on imperial characters;

their stories, too, were as worthy of being told. Menander's plays particularly emphasized a civilized world in which the rules of humanity prevail.

## Mythology and the Gods

Early Greek drama, both tragedy and comedy, drew from the stories of mythology and legend. These myths illuminated universal problems, ones that could pertain to situations plaguing fifthcentury Greece as well as to past events. The ancient Greeks believed that tragedy should deal with illustrious figures and significant events, thus the pantheon of gods is ever-present and, often, omniscient. Aeschylus' plays, for instance, often centered on the justification of the gods' ways in relation to humankind or the comprehension of the form of justice meted out by the gods. The gods might punish the characters, as Zeus punished Prometheus in *Prometheus Bound*, or they might settle the seemingly insurmountable conflicts the characters faced, as when Athena decreed that the Furies must give up their torment of Orestes in the *Oresteia*. The tragedians took the basic premise of their stories from mythology but transformed them for dramatic intent, infusing the heroes and heroines with human qualities and relating their themes to the present day. Mythology also lent the tragedians' plays a more universal quality, allowing them to comment on topical events without limiting their scope to contemporary events and figures.

Gods also played a prominent role in Old Comedy. Cratinus's *Dionysalexandrus* is a play of mythological burlesque. It retells the story of the judgment of Paris (Alexander), with variations. Aristophanes' work parodies tragedy; thus the Greek gods and goddesses take a central role in the lives of its characters. However, mythology in drama was on the wane. Athens' defeat in the Peloponnesian War contributed to the sense of disillusionment that the ancient Greeks felt with their legendary heroes and gods, and with the rise of the New Comedy, writers wer moving away from mythological subjects toward common subjects that centered on love and family life.

## Love

Love as a dramatic theme was first introduced in the comedic plays. The New Comedy placed its major plot emphasis on romantic intrigue, such as a young man's efforts to win the bride of his choice. Plays of the New Comedy often end in marriage. Menander's plays might introduce perverse complications. In *The Arbitrators*, the problems arise when a newly married woman bears a child shortly after the wedding. The husband accuses her of being unfaithful; however, unbeknownst to him, her husband previously raped her at a festival. The play ends happily, with the husband's remorseful speech.

# Style

## Structure

As set out by Aristotle in his *Poetics* in 350 B.C., tragedy generally follows a set sequence of events. First, the *hamartia* takes place. This is the tragic error committed by the hero, and it usually is committed unwittingly. Oedipus' act of killing Laius and marrying Jocasta is the *hamartia* in *Oedipus the King*. The unexpected turn of events that brings this error to light is known as the *peripeteia*, and the hero's recognition of this error is the *anagnorisis*. According to Aristotle, the *peripeteia* and the *anagnorisis* are most effective when occurring at the same time. They often come about when the true identity of one of the characters becomes known. This is the case for Oedipus, whose discovery of who his real father is causes him to recognize that his wife is his mother, thereby leading to the reversal of his situation from happiness to misery. Lastly comes the catharsis, the release of the emotions of fear and pity that the tragedy has aroused in the audience.

Old Comedy also had a distinct structure. The first part is the introduction or prologue, in which the plot is explained and developed. The play proper begins with the *parados*, which is the entry of the chorus. This is followed by the *agon*, or contest, which is a ritualized debate between two main characters, a character and the chorus, or two halves of the chorus; and the *parabasis*, in which the chorus speaks to the audience about the political and social events of the day and also criticizes Athens' well-known citizens. Following a series of farcical scenes, the play concludes with a banquet or wedding. While Old Comedy followed a formal design, it had little conventional plot, instead presenting a series of episodes, which, when taken together, illustrated a serious political or social issue. New Comedy, however, articulated the plot much more clearly and featured characters who devised intrigues and tricks to achieve certain goals.

## Chorus

The Greek chorus played a crucial role in Greek plays. Members of the chorus□twelve to fifteen actors□remained on stage throughout the entire play and periodically recited poetic songs in unison. Overall, the chorus observed and interpreted the actions of the play, reacted to characters and events, and even probed the characters with questions and gave advice. However, the chorus took on additional responsibilities in the hands of different playwrights. In some plays, the chorus helped move the plot along. In other plays, it introduced major themes. "The chorus complements, illustrates, universalizes, or dramatically justifies the course of events," writes Michael Grant in *Myths of the Greeks and Romans*, "it comments or moralizes or mythologizes upon what happens, and opens up the spiritual dimension of the theme or displays the reaction of public opinion."

However, the role of the chorus changed over time and in the hands of the three great tragedians. For Aeschylus, the chorus played a more central role. In the *Suppliants*, the chorus is actually the protagonist, while in *Agamemnon*, the play's themes find clearest expression in the vocalizations of the chorus. In Sophoclean drama, the chorus could be interpreted as a group of characters itself, with a distinct perception and point of view. In some of Sophocles's plays, as in *Ajax* and *Electra*, the chorus was most closely attached to the title character. In other plays, namely *Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, the choruses are made up of city elders who present their opinions on the events they are witnessing. By the time of Euripides, however, the chorus had taken on a far less crucial role. According to Rex Warner writing in *Three Great Plays of Euripides*, in the works of Euripides, "The chorus perform in the role of sympathetic listeners and commentators, or provide the audience with a kind of musical and poetic relief from the difficulties or horrors of the action."

Comedy also made use of the chorus. In Old Comedy, the chorus might take on a slightly different role. For instance, members of the chorus often stirred up trouble among characters. By contrast, the New Comedy used the chorus primarily as a small band of performers who served to entertain the audience or provide musical interludes between scenes.

## Satyr Plays

Satyr plays were a blend of tragedy and comedy. The underlying themes of the plays were usually of a serious nature, but their plots and tone were absurd and designed for humor. They featured obscene visual and verbal humor as well as characters called satyrs, which were half-man, halfanimal, and Silenus, a mythical horseman. Satyr plays were presented after the tragedies at the theatrical competitions and presented a humorous or farcical version of the tragedy that had just been witnessed. Satyr plays were shorter than tragedies, had their unique choral dance, and used more colloquial speech. Like tragedies, satyr plays drew their themes and subjects from mythology. Because Euripides' *Cyclops* is the only satyr play that has survived in its entirety, little concrete information is known about them, however.

## Deus Ex Machina

Literally meaning "god from the machine," *deus ex machina* was the entry of a god or gods at the end of the play to save the protagonist. The *machina*, a staging device, was a crane that flew in the gods or heroes at the end of the play. Euripides and Aristophanes both frequently employed a *deus ex machina* ending. Euripides' gods would explain in an epilogue what happened next or would remove the protagonist. For example, the *deus ex machina* was used in *Medea* to bring Helios, the sun god, to save Medea from the wrath of Jason, her husband, as well as to allow her to take the bodies of their sons, thus depriving her husband of even the solace of their proper burial.

## Unity

Ancient Greek tragedies upheld what Aristotle later named the Unities of Time, Place, and Action. Unity of time required that the play take place in twenty-four hours or less; unity of place required that the play take place in a single location; and unity of action required that the play focus on only one central story or action and eliminate action or characters that were not relevant to the plot. However, some critics have pointed out that the unity of time was not strictly adhered to but more implied by the close focus on relevant action. For example, Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* opens on the morning that the Trojan War ends in Asia Minor, yet by the end of that day, Agamemnon has returned some five hundred miles from the conflict, to Greece, where he is murdered by his wife. Aristotle believed that observance of the unities contributed to the intensity of the audience's experience while viewing the play, particularly the cathartic response.

# Historical Context

## The City Dionysia

Drama arose out of feasts held in honor of the Greek god Dionysus. By the eighth century B.C., the Greeks had developed elaborate rituals in his honor, which included poetry recitations and a ceremony called the *dithyramb*. Over time, the *dithyramb*, which was a special form of verse about Dionysus that was accompanied by song and dance, became the highlight of the festival, and it developed to include tales of other gods and heroes. Beginning about 535 B.C., Athens began to hold annual festivals known as City Dionysia. This festival included a dramatic competition of *dithyramb* and *rhapsodia*□Homeric recitation contests. The poet Thespis was the first winner of this contest. His play included *dithyramb* and *rhapsodia*, but he expanded these traditional presentations to include a chorus as well. Thespis thus developed a new art form that later became known as theatrical plays.

The performance began with a procession made up of the playwrights, wealthy citizens who funded the festival, choruses, actors, and important public officials. This parade wended its way through the streets of Athens on the first day of the competition. The procession entered the theater, and then the public sacrifice of a bull to Dionysus took place. The competition opened with the *dithyrambic* contests, and the three tragedies were performed in the ensuing days, each followed by a satyr play. Magistrates responsible for theatrical productions during the City Dionysia were given the responsibility of producing comedies about 487 B.C., though volunteers probably produced them there for some years before that. The comedies were presented at night, after the tragedies. A panel of ten judges selected the top winners.

The City Dionysia remained an integral part of Athens' culture throughout the city's Golden Age. Taking place at the end of March, it was a major holiday attraction. Greeks from other city-states were welcome to attend the competition or enter plays in it.

## The Age of Pericles

Democracy was born in Athens in the late sixth century B.C., after a long period of dictatorship. To prevent a dictatorship from taking shape once again, the populace developed a set of strong laws. Athenian males, excluding slaves, voted on the city's political and economic affairs. The city's assembly made all legislative and electoral decisions.

The defence of the city was managed by ten generals, elected on an annual basis; Pericles was frequently elected as one of these generals and held the post almost every year from 443 to his death in 429. He first came to prominence in 463 and dominated Athenian politics from 447 B.C. until his death in 429. Pericles sought to increase the

Athenian empire and bolster the city's power throughout Greece. His ambitions led Athens into the Peloponnesian War.

The rise of democracy plays prominent roles in the tragedies. The *Oresteia*, for example, reflects the transformation of Athens from the code of tribal vengeance to the rule of communal, or state, law. According to some critics, Creon, the king-tyrant of Thebes in *Antigone*, was modeled at least in part on Pericles and was intended to serve as a warning to Pericles and the Athenian people about the dangers of dictatorship and putting too much power in the hands of one person.

## The Peloponnesian War

By the mid-fifth century B.C., Athens had built an empire that included many of the Greek citystates. However, it did not rule its empire as democratically as it did its own city-state. Other Greek cities within the Athenian Empire grew discontented and began to turn to Sparta, Athens' long-standing rival, for protection. In 431 B.C., Sparta and its allies declared war on Athens, a war which came to involve most of the city-states. The war lasted for an entire generation, bringing great loss of life, including the death of Pericles. In 404 B.C., Athens surrendered, and the ensuing years were ones of instability for Greece. Aristophanes used the backdrop of the Peloponnesian War in many of his plays. Though many of the scenes were very funny, he sought to convey the lesson of the absurdity of the war.

## Greek Women

The Greek tragedies depict strong, independent women, but in ancient Athens, this was a rare role for women to play. Women were unable to participate in politics and government; they could not vote or hold office. They rarely were even seen outside the home, except at such events as festivals, marriages, and funerals. They could not marry without the sanction of their male guardian. Only men could initiate divorce, and this was relatively easy for them to accomplish.

However, the tragedians in their plays create women who defy such social standards and the laws that uphold them. Antigone is one such character, choosing to ignore the decree of the king when she decides to bury her brother. Antigone's sister, Ismene, reminds her of their subordinate status "We must remember, first, that we were born women, who should not strive with men" but Antigone ignores this warning and follows her own conscience. Medea is another character who flouts contemporary standards. At the beginning of *Medea*, she openly speaks out against the unfairness of this system to the women of Corinth. Throughout the drama, she emerges as a completely dominating figure.

# Movement Variations

## Other Forms of Tragedy

Aside from the tragedy of the ancient Greeks, great tragedy has been created only in three other periods and places: England, from 1558 to 1625; seventeenth-century France; and Europe and America from the mid-nineteenth century to the midtwentieth century. Like Greek theater, Elizabethan drama arose out of religious ceremonies. *Gorboduc*, by Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton, the first formal tragedy in English, was performed in 1561, but Christopher Marlowe, who wrote in the late 1500s, was the first tragedian worthy of the Greek tradition. Shakespeare produced his five greatest tragedies in the first years of the 1600s. However, tragedy as a drama form began to decline after Shakespeare. During the 1600s, however, dramatists in France were also attempting to bring back the ancient form of Greek tragedy. Pierre Corneille and Jean Racine represent the best of the French neoclassical period. These playwrights closely followed the Greek models and Aristotelian unities and drew characters and situations from ancient Greece. Modern tragedy began with Norway's Henrik Ibsen, Sweden's August Strindberg, and Russia's Anton Chekhov. In America, however, few plays presented the full dimensions of tragedy. Some critics have called Eugene O'Neill the first American to write tragedy for the American theater; he sought to accomplish the creation of true tragedy because he believed that the meaning of life□and its hope□lay in the tragic.

## The Greek Theater and the Staging of Plays

The ancient Greek theater was an outdoor area consisting of a large circular dancing floor on which the action took place (called the orchestra); a "scene building" (*skene*, from which the modern word *scene* derives) facade behind the orchestra to which painted scenery could be attached; and a semicircular auditorium around the orchestra fitted with bleachers to seat anywhere from ten to twenty thousand spectators. People from all social classes attended the Greek plays.

Plays began with the entrance of the actors and the chorus, accompanied by musicians, through the two entrances on either side of the orchestra. The performers moved and gestured in unison, only breaking formation when they reached their assigned places in the orchestra. Then the story began to unfold, and the members of the chorus moved from place to place as they reacted to the play's events and characters. The actors who were distinct from the chorus wore elaborate masks that depicted recognizable types, for example, old men or young women. These masks allowed the same actor to play multiple roles in the different scenes of the play and also let men play women's parts. The theatrical costumes were brightly colored, which aided in character recognition as well. For example, royalty wore purple. All the action took place in outdoor settings, either natural or urban ones.

# Opera

Opera developed out of the Greek tragedies. This musical form was created in Florence, Italy, at the end of the sixteenth century when a group of scholars, poets, and musicians, called the Camerata, discovered the important role that music had played in ancient tragedy. Members of the Camerata collaborated and performed two shows based on mythological stories of Daphne and Eurydice, in 1597 and 1600, respectively. Both performances combined drama, music, and spectacle into what they believed was a recreation of Greek tragedy. The operas were an immediate success, and, in the early 1600s, this new type of performance spread throughout Italy as well as to France, Austria, Germany, and England. By 1607, Claude Monteverdi's masterpiece, *Orfeo*, established the fundamental form of the European opera that would remain virtually unchanged for the next three hundred years.

# Representative Authors

## Aristophanes (c. 450-385 B.C.)

Aristophanes was born about 450 B.C., possibly on the island Aegina in Greece. His plays are the only examples of Old Comedy (comedy that focuses largely on political satire rather than human relations, the focus of New Comedy) that have survived in their complete form. Aristophanes' themes and work generally reflected the social, literary, and philosophical life of Athens, and many of his plays were inspired by events of the Peloponnesian War. Eleven of his approximately forty plays survive. Among the most well-known are *Birds* and *Frogs*. His appeal lay in his witty dialogue, his satire, and the inventiveness of his comic scenes. Many of his plays are still produced on the modern stage. Aristophanes died about 385 B.C. in Athens, Greece.

## Crates (fl. c. 470-450 B.C.)

Flourishing about 470 B.C. in Athens, Crates is considered to be the founder of Greek comedy. According to Aristotle, he abandoned traditional comedy□which centered on invective□and introduced more general stories that relied on welldeveloped plots.

## Cratinus (?-c. 420 B.C.)

Cratinus was regarded in antiquity as one of the three great writers of the Old Comedy period. Only fragments of his twenty-seven known plays survive, but they are enough to show that his comedies, like those of Aristophanes, seem to have been a mixture of parodied mythology and reference to contemporary events. For example, Athenian leader Pericles was a frequent subject of Cratinus's ridicule. He died about 420 B.C.

## Epicharmus (c. 530-440 B.C.)

Epicharmus was born about 530 B.C. He is seen as the originator of Sicilian, or Doric, comedy. He is credited with more than fifty plays, but few lines survive. Many of his plays were mythological burlesques: he even satirized the gods. His lively style made his work more akin to New Comedy than the Old Comedy of his time. He died about 440 B.C.

## Eupolis (fl. c. 445-411 B.C.)

Along with Cratinus and Aristophanes, Eupolis was regarded in antiquity as one of the three great writers of the Old Comedy period. His first play was produced in 429 B.C., but only fragments of his plays survive. He focused his satire on Athenian demagogues, wealthy citizens, but also concerned himself with serious subjects, such as how Athens

could turn the tables on Sparta in the ongoing Peloponnesian War. Eupolis died about 411 B.C. while he was still a young man.

## Euripides (c. 485-406 B.C.)

Euripides was born about 485 B.C. in Attica (the region of central Greece that has Athens as its capital). One of the great three tragedians, he won his first victory at the City Dionysia, in which he competed twenty-two times, in 441. Nineteen (including one play of disputed authorship) of his ninety-two plays survive. His most famous plays include *Medea*, produced in 431 B.C.; *Hippolytus* (428 B.C.); *Electra* (417 B.C.); *Trojan Women* (415 B.C.); *Ion* (circa 411 B.C.); *Iphigenia at Aulis* (405 B.C., posthumously); and *Bacchae* (405 B.C., posthumously).

Euripides differed from Aeschylus and Sophocles in his characterization: Euripides' characters' tragic fates stem almost entirely from their own flawed natures and uncontrolled passions. The gods look upon their suffering with apparent indifference. His plays also differed structurally from those of the other two playwrights: Euripides' plays are usually introduced by prologues and often end with the providential appearance of a god, an action known as *deus ex machina*. The prologue usually is a monologue that explains the situation and the characters with which the action begins; the *deus ex machina* includes a god's epilogue that reveals the future fortunes of the characters. Euripides died in 406 B.C. in Macedonia.

## Menander (c. 342-292 B.C.)

Menander was born about 342 B.C. Today, he is considered to be the supreme writer of New Comedy (comedy that focuses on human relations), but, during his lifetime, he was less successful. Of the more than one hundred plays that he wrote, only eight won prizes at Athens' dramatic festivals. He produced his first play in 321 B.C. The only one of his plays to survive intact is *Dyscolus*, which won a festival prize in 317. The Roman writers Plautus and Terence adapted many of Menander's works; thus he influenced the development of European comedy from the Renaissance on. Menander died about 292 B.C.

## Phrynichus (fl. c. 420 B.C.)

Phrynichus was an Athenian poet of the Old Comedy period and a contemporary of Aristophanes and Eupolis. He began producing plays in 430 B.C. and won two victories in the City Dionysia.

## Sophocles (c. 496-406 B.C.)

Sophocles was born about 496 B.C. in Colonus, near Athens. He is one of classical Athens' three great tragic playwrights. He first won the City Dionysia in 468 B.C.,

defeating Aeschylus. He went on to write a total of 123 tragedies for this annual festival, winning perhaps as many as twenty-four times and never receiving less than second prize. Of the seven of his plays that have survived, his most well-known drama is *Oedipus the King*, which was performed sometime between 430 B.C. and 426 B.C. Sophocles also made important dramatic innovations. He reduced the number of members of the chorus and added a third actor onstage. He is noted for his language, artistry, and vivid characterizations.

Sophocles also was a prominent citizen of Athens in that he served as a treasurer in the Delian League (the confederation of Greek states with Athens as the leader that formed in 478 B.C., soon after the defeat of the Persian invasion under Xerxes in order to ensure continued freedom), was elected as one of ten military and naval commanders, and served as one of ten members of the advisory committee that organized Athens' financial and domestic recovery after its defeat during the Peloponnesian War at Syracuse in 413 B.C. Sophocles died in 406 B.C. in Athens.

## Sophron (fl. c. 430 B.C.)

Sophron of Syracuse lived and wrote in the early to mid 400s B.C. He wrote rhythmical prose mimes that depicted scenes from daily life.

## Thespis (fl. c. 534 B.C.)

Thespis came from the district of Icaria in Attica. He is the first recorded winner of the prize at the City Dionysia, which he won in about 534 B.C. Thespis is credited with the invention of the speaking actor (who "delivered prologues and conversed with the chorus-leader" and impersonated the heroes that his drama was about), thus becoming the world's first actor. He is considered to be the "inventor of tragedy."

# Representative Works

## Antigone

Sophocles' *Antigone* (441 B.C.) depicts the title character's defiance of the king of Thebes and his edicts. Antigone's brother has died in his rebellion against the king, Creon, who is also his uncle, and Creon has forbidden proper burial rites to be carried out for him. The play's clash is between Antigone and Creon, whose differences center on opposing attitudes toward authority; Antigone values the personal sphere and the laws of gods and religions, whereas Creon values authoritarian control and the subordination of personal feeling to the state.

## Bacchae

Many critics regard the *Bacchae* (circa 405 B.C.) as Euripides' masterpiece. In this play, the god Dionysus arrives in Thebes to introduce his cult. King Pentheus resists, so Dionysus causes the women, including Pentheus's mother, to fall into a deluded, frenzied state. When the women come across Pentheus, they believe him to be a wild animal, and they kill and dismember him. Dionysus considers his terrible revenge justified, thus showing his own lack of morality. The play demonstrates how the ecstatic side of the Dionysiac religion needs reason and self-control for balance.

## Birds

Along with *Frogs*, *Birds* (414 B.C.) is widely considered to be one of Aristophanes' masterpieces. It exemplifies the utopian theme in Greek literature. The ruler of Athens, Peisthetaerus, wants to escape the war that has engulfed Greece, and he has persuaded the birds to join him in building a new city that will hang in the sky, between the dominions of humankind and the gods. Peisthetaerus comes to rule over even the gods. *Birds* satirizes Athens' imperial goals, and some critics believe that it foretells the city's impending loss to Sparta in the Peloponnesian War and subsequent decline. *Birds* is longer than any other ancient Greek drama□comedy or tragedy□and demonstrates the prowess of Aristophanes.

## Dyscolus

*Dyscolus* (The Grouch), Menander's prizewinning play, was first produced in 317 B.C. While the play tells about a young man's efforts to marry, it focuses on the curmudgeonly figure of the girl's father, Knemon, whose misanthropy has led him to abandon his parental responsibility. The play, an early work, is relatively simple, but it is the only one of Menander's plays for which a complete text exists today, and it shows his ability to create surprise in the final act.

## Frogs

Many critics consider *Frogs* to be one of Aristophanes' masterpieces. It mixes humor and serious matters with contemporary politics, literary criticism, gods, and religion. It won first prize at the City Dionysia when it was first produced in 405 B.C. and was unusually honored by being given a repeat production. In *Frogs*, Dionysus, the god of drama, goes to the underworld to bring Euripides back to Athens. In Hades, Dionysus witnesses a drama competition between Euripides and Aeschylus; Euripides represents the modern age, while Aeschylus represents the elite and the glory days of the past. As a result of the competition, Dionysus decides to take Aeschylus back to the land of the living with him instead of Euripides, believing that Aeschylus is better able to restore moral, political, and martial strength in Athens' citizenry.

## Lysistrata

Arisophanes' comedy *Lysistrata* was written in 411 B.C., a few years after Athenian warriors were defeated in Sicily in the Peloponnesian War. *Lysistrata* has the women of Athens, in conjunction with the rest of the women in Greece□including the Spartan enemies□go on a domestic and sexual strike in order to force their husbands to stop fighting. Aristophanes thus used women, who took no part in political or military life, to attack the long-lasting war. This play is the most often produced Greek Drama in modern times.

## Medea

*Medea* (431 B.C.) is one of Euripides' most powerful and best-known plays. It focuses on Medea, who takes revenge on her unfaithful husband by killing their sons. The play depicts her struggle between her sense of personal injury and her love for her children, and it raises an important theme of Greek tragedy, vengeance. Despite Medea's horrible actions, Euripides evokes sympathies for Medea, who, for most of the play, has the support of the women of Corinth.

## Oedipus at Colonus

*Oedipus at Colonus* (produced circa 401 B.C., posthumously), Sophocles' final play, finds the old, blind Oedipus at the sacred grove at Colonus, a village near Athens. He has spent the past years in exile, rejected by his family with the exception of his two daughters. Now, however, his sons and his brother-in-law turn to him to help them protect the city of Thebes. The play is noted for its melancholy, beauty, and lyricism. Sophocles also invests in Oedipus spiritual and moral authority. Some critics have read the play biographically, as Sophocles' poetic last will and testament.

## Oedipus the King

Also known as *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus the King*, first presented by Sophocles about 427 B.C., is one of the most important tragedies ever written. It concerns the downfall of Oedipus, the king of Thebes, who discovers that he unwittingly has killed his father and married his mother. When Oedipus realizes what he has done, he blinds himself and leaves Thebes. However, although Oedipus has fulfilled his preordained fate, his actions show integrity and powerful self-will. They also show an acceptance of his new and horrific existence. Aristotle used this play in his *Poetics* to define the qualities of all successful tragedies. Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud made use of the story of Oedipus in coining the term *Oedipal complex* to express man's usually suppressed desire to get rid of his father in order to marry his mother and have her all to himself.

## Oresteia

Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is the only trilogy that has survived from ancient Greece. First performed in 458 B.C., it consists of *Agamemnon*, *Choephoroi* (The Libation Bearers), and *Eumenides* (which referes to the "kindly ones," the avenging furies who seek vengeance on Orestes). It tells the story of the cycle of murder, vengeance, punishment, and justice acted out within the royal house of Atreus. The *Oresteia* is widely considered to be Aeschylus' masterpiece and one of the greatest works of world literature. It is remarkable for its brilliant union of poetry, song, dance, and music as well as its depiction of the development of the Athenian democratic jury system.

## Prometheus Bound

*Prometheus Bound* was presented as one part of a trilogy in 472 B.C. In the play, Prometheus has defied Zeus and saved humankind by giving them fire, and Zeus has chained Prometheus to a peak as punishment. The struggle of the play derives from the clash of wills between the powerful king of the gods, Zeus, and Prometheus, who stubbornly refuses to share the secret knowledge concerning Zeus's ability to hold onto his power. Prometheus has come to stand for an archetypal figure of defiance against tyrannical power. Some scholars doubt Aeschylus's authorship of *Prometheus Bound*.

# Critical Overview

Greek drama has been very important for the ancient Greeks, later literary development, and modern audiences. Aeschylus, the earliest Greek tragedian, laid the foundation for an aesthetics of drama that would influence plays for well over two thousand years. As E. Christian Kopf stated in "Aeschylus" from *The Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 176: *Ancient Greek Authors*, "In the twentieth century Aeschylus's plays, especially his trilogy known as the *Oresteia* (458 B.C.), are widely considered to be masterpieces containing some of the greatest poetry ever composed for the stage."

The artistic effects of Greek tragedy□the earliest form of drama created□were felt almost immediately. Aristophanes' *Frogs*, produced in 405 B.C., compares the work of Aeschylus and Euripides. Athenian philosophers began to analyze Greek drama as its period of greatness drew to an end. Plato initiated the history of criticism of tragedy with his speculation on the role of censorship in the *Republic*, written about 380 B.C. Fearing the power of tragedy's language to excite emotions that might be harmful to social order, he recommended that tragedians submit their works to a philosopher ruler for approval. John J. Keaney summarizes Plato's beliefs in *Ancient Writers*:

> Particularly repugnant to his own religious views are such literary statements as those stating that the gods are responsible for human evils, that they appear to men in various disguises, that they are untruthful.

Aristotle was one of the earliest known critics of Greek drama. In his *Poetics*, written about 334 B.C., Aristotle defined a perfect tragedy as imitating actions that excite "pity and fear," which ends in bringing about a cathartic effect. Aristotle also emphasized plot over character. "Most important of all," he said, "is the structure of the incidents. For tragedy is an imitation not of men but of an action and of life." In several chapters of his *Poetics*, Aristotle analyzed Greek tragedies, finding commonalties in structure, characterization, and plot devices. He also found Euripides to be the "most tragic of dramatists."

The Roman poet Horace discussed in his *Ars Poetics* (Art of Poetry) the Greek tradition of having dramatic and forbidding events, such as Medea's murder of her two children, take place offstage instead of being performed onstage. He transformed this tendency into a dictum on decorum. Horace believed that tragedy was a genre with its own style. For example, a theme for comedy may not be expressed in a tragedy. Such stylistic distinction lasted throughout the century, as noted in Italian writer Dante's "De Vulgari Eloquentia" ("Of Eloquence in the Vulgar"), written between 1304 and 1305.

Margarete Bieber wrote in *The History of the Greek and Roman Theater* that Greek theater was "so rich and many-sided that each later period of European civilization has found some aspect of it to use as an inspiration or model for its own time." Indeed, Greek plays enjoyed enormous popularity in the Roman Empire, and nearly all the plays

performed there were imitations or loose translations of Greek dramas. In the second century B.C., Plautus and Terence, the most important writers of Roman comedy, were influenced by the Greek New Comedy. When European writers returned to drama, after the medieval period ended, they, in turn, were influenced by Plautus and Terence. Thus the stock characters that were originally created by the Greek comedians continued to thrive.

In addition to experiencing a reawakening of an interest in Roman comedies, Renaissance audiences also began to stage Greek tragedies. From the 1500s on, plays by the three great tragedians were translated and performed in such countries as France, Italy, and Germany.

Contemporary drama is greatly influenced by Greek drama. Many playwrights, such as Eugene O'Neill, have reworked the ancient tragedies. Numerous tragedies as well as comedies continue to be presented on the modern stage. Jeffrey Henderson noted in *The Dictionary of Literary Biography* that audiences throughout the world enjoy Aristophanes' "memorable poetry, style, and fantasy." He also pointed out that these comedies "remain highly useful to historians of classical Athens for their power to illuminate the political vitality and intellectual richness of that extraordinary era."

Tragedies remain successful for different reasons, namely their universal themes, which render them relevant to audiences. Charles R. Walker stated in his 1966 study *Sophocles' "Oedipus the King" and "Oedipus at Colonus"* that "*Oedipus* and other Greek plays have begun to speak to the modern world with the authority of living theater." Toward the end of the twentieth century, Karelisa V. Hartigan, writing in *Greek Tragedy on the American Stage*, upheld this view:

> The theme or message of the plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides has consistently been deemed important, because the issues addressed by the writers of fifth-century B.C. Athens continue to be current, continue to have a relevance for twentieth-century America.

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

# Critical Essay #1

*Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, Korb discusses the themes of justice and vengeance in Greek tragedy*.

Greek tragedies all raise questions about humankind's existence and its suffering. One of their most insistent concerns was the elusive nature of justice, particularly divine justice, and the intrinsically linked concept of the validity of revenge. The ancient Greeks believed that the gods begrudged human greatness and caused people who were too successful to make poor choices of action. Often, these actions revolved around excessive pride, or hubris. Thus the terrible undoings that befell these prideful people could be seen as just punishment. Each of the three great tragedians raised such issues, but as they held unique perceptions of the world and the way they wanted to portray it, they were also unique in the depiction of justice.

Aeschylus inherited a belief in a just Zeus and hereditary guilt. Both of these threads can be found in his surviving tragedies. His plays sought to justify the gods' ways to the Greek people. Aeschylus's *Persians* depicts how Xerxes and his invading Persians are punished for their own offenses. Xerxes has been driven by his desire for dominance to go beyond what the gods have fated for him control of Persia, not of Greece as well. Thus he is punished for his attempts to disrupt the cosmic order, and his defeat transforms him from the godlike man seen at the play's beginning to a mere mortal, dressed in tatters instead of royal finery, seen at the end of the play.

*Prometheus Bound*, one play in a trilogy, depicts divine justice specifically, as Zeus punishes Prometheus, who has saved humankind by sharing fire with them. He is chained to a craggy peak, sent to the underworld, and fed upon by a vulture every day. Aeschylus's text demonstrates Prometheus's heroic status as he submits to his prolonged, and seemingly unjust, punishment. The text glorifies Prometheus, who emerges as a martyr. That he eventually reconciles with Zeus (in the last play of the *Promethiad* trilogy, *Prometheus Unbound*, now lost) seems to prove that his extreme punishment was undeserved.

In other plays, Aeschylus uses more complex relationships and events to investigate the theme of justice. The ancient Greeks believed in the idea of hereditary guilt, and Aeschylus's plays evince this theory. Often it is not the unjust who are punished, but their descendants. The *Oresteia* is an ideal play to study the themes of revenge and justice; in this trilogy, these themes are intrinsically linked together. The human desire for vengeance is what drives the need for a prevailing justice.

In the first play of the trilogy, *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra murders her husband upon his return from the Trojan War. She kills Agamemnon in revenge for his sacrifice of their daughter at the beginning of the expedition against Troy, as well as to punish him for taking a mistress. After the deed is done, she stands over the body and insists to the chorus that justice has been accomplished. However, Apollo orders Orestes, the son of

Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, to avenge his father's death and murder his mother. After he does so, the chorus sings a song of thanksgiving, celebrating the victory of justice. However, the third play of the trilogy finds Orestes pursued by the Furies, underworld avenging powers whom Clytemnestra has cursed upon him. Eventually, Orestes is brought to trial at the court of Athens, attended by the goddess Athena, who, when the vote of the jury is evenly split, votes to acquit him and provides a sanctuary where the furies may rest. Only then is the cycle of bloodshed and vengeance in the house of Atreus brought to an end. So, justice can now be found in the courts, aided by the intervention of Athena, rather than through the actions of family and tribal members seeking vengeance.

Sophocles was the next great tragedian. Charles Segal wrote of Sophocles in *Ancient Writers*, "While retaining Aeschylus' mood of deep religious seriousness, Sophocles deals with the question of divine justice and the problem of suffering in a more naturalistic way." Because his focus remains on the human world rather than the world of the gods, the issues of justice are more human-centered. Many critics and scholars believe that Sophocles most closely relates the truest state of human experience, thus the decisions made by Sophocles' characters rest more upon their mortal shoulders, not upon the shoulders of the gods.

*Electra* condenses the plot of the *Oresteia* into one play, which focuses on the daughter's desire for justice and vengeance for the death of Agamemnon. Isolated in the palace after her father's murder, Electra remains the sole voice raised against allowing the crime to go unpunished and unnoticed. She lives for only one thing□the return of Orestes so he can avenge the murder. When she learns the (false) news of his death, she attempts to enlist the help of her sister in the murder of Clytemnestra, but when her sister refuses, she resolves to carry out the matricide by herself. Although Orestes shows up at the last moment and carries out the murder while Electra waits outside the house with the chorus, Electra's single-minded purpose shows the consuming power of the desire for vengeance and a form□albeit a criminal one□of justice.

Sophocles's masterpiece, *Oedipus the King*, shows a different way that justice can be attained□ through self-punishment. In this play, Oedipus has unknowingly killed his father and married his mother. Oedipus□left to die as a baby by his real father, rescued by a shepherd from a nearby kingdom, and adopted into the royal family of that kingdom □committed these crimes against the laws of nature without realizing what he was doing. Despite his lack of moral culpability, when Oedipus discovers what he has done, he blinds himself. While the play ends on a note of despair, Oedipus's action can be construed in a positive light, since he has administered punishment to himself and brought about justice for ill deeds. Instead of committing suicide, as his wife/mother does, Oedipus chooses a more extreme form of self-punishment, "For no one else of mortals except me can bear my sufferings."

Euripides presents a very different picture of justice than his predecessors in the Greek tragic tradition. Justice is no longer a motivating theme but an ironic one. In *Hippolytus*, the goddess Aphrodite takes revenge on Hippolytus because he refuses to worship her. She is not acting out of a respect for justice but out of spite. In the *Bacchae*, Dionysus,

scorned by Pentheus, causes a group of women, including Pentheus's mother, to murder and dismember Pentheus, while they are in a state of frenzy. Unlike the gods in the plays or Aeschylus and Sophocles, the gods in Euripides' plays cannot be appealed to for justice, nor will they help promote it, as Athena did in the *Eumenides*. Instead, in these two plays, Euripides shows their personal injustice, which has been seen earlier but never caused by such pettiness and self-indulgence.

In Euripides' play *Medea*, justice and vengeance take a shocking form. To punish her husband for forsaking her, Medea raises the idea of murdering their children. Her passion for revenge is so strong that, despite a long monologue in which she questions this choice, Medea decides this is the right action to take. Medea's inner conflict is what raises her to the status of tragic heroine. She closes her inner debate with these words: "Though I understand what sort of evil I am going / to do, still, heart is stronger than what I have / thought out, this heart that causes humankind's / greatest evils." Medea thus recognizes that the action she is taking is governed by the need for human vengeance, not by the desire to correct injustice. Also interesting is that, though the children suffer for the wrongdoings of their parents, it is not because of inherent guilt, so Medea reverses the idea of hereditary guilt that was such a crucial part of the *Oresteia*.

Euripides also has his own rendition of the *Oresteia*, the play *Orestes*. Orestes' revenge is of a dual nature: it is sanctioned by Apollo, who commanded the murder of Clytemnestra, thus it represents divine vengeance; it is also vengeance of a personal and heroic nature, because he also kills Clytemnestra to recover his birthright. However, because Euripides places greater emphasis on the individual's own choice of action than on his or her preordained fate laid out by the gods, Orestes' actions are viewed more as revenge than as justice. As the play begins, it is Orestes who must face the demands of justice, the justice of the city. As Christian Wolff wrote in *Ancient Writers*, "It is as though the heroic and divinely sanctioned mode of revenge were being put on trial by the human community."

In *Greek Tragedy on the American Stage*, Karelisa V. Hartigan noted that part of the appeal of the plays *Medea* and *Electra* is the theme of revenge. "The theme of Euripides' text has not seemed to trouble either those onstage or those in the audience overly much," she wrote. Indeed, modern audiences bring their own points of view to these plays, and looking through the eyes of feminism, some critics see Medea's act of revenge as stemming from Jason's "victimization" of her. A play such as Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, according to Hartigan, is less attractive to modern audiences because the title character takes no personal revenge against those who cause his suffering. Greek tragedy continues to be relevant to modern audiences because the themes it presents are universal, crossing boundaries of time and place.

**Source:** Rena Korb, Critical Essay on Greek Drama, in *Literary Movements for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

# Critical Essay #2

*In the following introduction to his* Public and Performance in the Greek Theatre*, Arnott explores the physical dimensions of the Greek stage, their significance, and their influence on drama written to be performed there.*

Plays are conditioned by their environment. Every age produces its handful of closet dramatists, who elect to write in dramatic form as a literary convenience, with no expectation of production; and there are always a few who write for some visionary theatre of the future, asking more than the state of the art can give. But practising playwrights work from a basis of practical stagecraft. They write for the kind of playhouse they know; for actors whose skills and training they are familiar with; and for an audience whose preconceptions are known, and whose responses are predictable. The design of the theatre building, the nature of the space available, the possibility of adapting and decorating this space; all these factors help to shape the play. We would have a very different *Hamlet* had it been written for a picture-frame stage rather than for an open platform. The same factors work upon the actor. The grammar of his art□the way in which he communicates with his audience□may be influenced by tradition or societal patterns, but is controlled in large part by the space in which he works. An actor in a large theatre works differently from an actor in a small one. Indoor and outdoor acting pose different problems, and invite different solutions.

In purpose-built structures, performance style and theatre architecture are often mutually influential. An actor accepts certain constraints upon his art because of the nature of the space available, or the quality of the acoustics; conversely, new buildings may be designed to capitalize on certain skills, or allow the actors to explore new dimensions of their art. In earlier dramatic cultures, however, the space comes first, and imposes its own rules on the performance. The art of the theatre did not spring fully born into the world. In all the manifestations that we know, drama emerged as a by-product of some other activity, usually some magico-religious activity. The first actors were priests, shamans, or sacred dancers, and the emergent dramas were first performed in spaces that had been designed for other purposes. Only after some time does drama establish itself as a separate and independent activity, and only then are buildings constructed specifically for the performance of plays. Almost invariably, these purpose-built theatres are influenced by the temporary spaces available before, to which the performers have now become accustomed. Plays, in other words, come before theatres; and when the theatres begin to appear, they illustrate the factors that brought the drama to birth.

The small group of plays, survivors of a vastly larger number, that we know collectively and rather misleadingly as Greek drama, were written for theatres of a unique and distinctive shape whose like has never been seen again. This shape was dictated by the cultural patterns of Greek society and by the nature of the Greek terrain. Its general features are well known from ancient evidence and surviving examples, a number of them still in use. Scholars argue endlessly, and ultimately unprofitably, about the details. Many features of the theatres remain obscure to us for lack of information. We have no

contemporary description of the structures that Aeschylus and Sophocles wrote for and acted in. Probably none was ever written. Why bother to describe something so familiar to everyone? The earliest written accounts date from centuries later, when much had changed and it was already too late. Surviving structures, still amply visible throughout Greece and the adjacent countries, are architectural palimpsests, obscured or obliterated by the successive rebuildings of subsequent generations. We know considerably less about them than we know about Shakespeare's Globe, in spite of the fact that the stonework is still there for us to see.

The general principles, however, are reasonably clear. In the Greek theatre complex the central and characteristic feature was the orchestra or dancing floor, a circle of flattened earth (later paved with stone), on which the chorus performed. In the theatre of Athens the orchestra is large enough to give ample room for a large chorus and complex dance patterns. The Greeks themselves traced the origin of drama from local festivals of song and dance, and the design of the theatre seems to bear this out. It is tempting to think that the earliest orchestras were the stone threshing floors still to be seen throughout the Greek countryside. These floors□in most places the only flat open space available□would lend themselves naturally to the rustic performances. When, in the course of time, a special orchestra was built for larger ceremonies, it would retain the shape of these remembered associations.

Round most of the orchestra, tiers of seats were built into the convenient hillside, so that spectators could look down on the performance. Such a structure, like a vast bowl set into the land, was a logical answer to the constraints of the Greek terrain. In a country where flat land is at a premium, the theatre grew organically out of its environment, opening the performance to the maximum number of spectators. On the far side of the circle stood the actors' place. This was the *skene*, literally hut or tent. In the early days of the theatre this was probably all it was: a rudimentary, temporary structure serving as a dressing room, a place from which the actors could make their entrances and, perhaps, a sounding board for their voices. An alternative theory suggests that the first *skene*, in Athens at least, was the façade of the Temple of Dionysus which abutted onto the orchestra. Even when, like the rest of the theatre, it became a structure of solid stone, the *skene* still retained its original name. On either side of the *skene* a processional entrance-way, the *parodos*, led into the orchestra.

This is all we can be sure of. Everything else is conjecture. Was there a raised stage for the actors, to give them prominence by elevating them above the chorus level? A case can be made for and against. We know that the fifth-century theatre had some machinery. Where exactly was it located, how did it work, and what was it supposed to do? We have tantalizingly brief descriptions, mostly late and sometimes contradictory.

On one aspect of the productions, however, there is fairly general agreement. Although the Greek *skene* gives us, by way of Latin, the English word 'scenery', the fifth-century theatre seems to have had nothing like scenery in our sense of the word: no backdrops, no realistic stage pictures, no scenic illusion. The only background was the façade of the *skene* building, decorated perhaps in architectural perspective but ubiquitous and unchanging. Our first evidence for movable panels to create different sets comes from a

century later. The orchestra was a blank surface against which the audience could watch the choral evolutions. Sufficient setting was provided□as in Shakespeare's theatre□by the audience's imagination, prompted by the language of the playwright. Song, dance, and the spoken word provided an ambiance for the play as well as carrying forward the action.

If we have such difficulty in picturing the theatre, how can we hope to reconstruct the actor's, necessarily transitory, performance? Once again, many details elude us. But, equally, certain dominant principles become dear, and we may assume certain imperatives from the nature of the space involved. The following chapters, by focusing on the nature of the Greek actors' art, will endeavour to show how closely intertwined the actions of author, actor, and theatre were, and illuminate some characteristic features of Greek playwriting that seem alien to us only because our conception of stage space and the actor's relationship to it has radically changed.

**Source:** Peter D. Arnott, "Introduction," in *Public and Performance in the Greek Theatre*, Routledge, 1989, pp. 1-4.

# Adaptations

*Oedipus Rex*, directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini, came out in 1967. It stars Silvana Mangano and Franco Citti and is in Italian with English subtitles.

*Medea*, starring Judith Anderson and Colleen Dewhurst and directed by José Quintero, appeared in cinemas in 1959. It is available on Ivy Classics Video (1991).

George Tzavellas's adaptation of *Antigone*, starring Irene Papas and Manos Katrakis, came out in 1962.

The opera *Oedipus Rex* was completed in 1949. It features music by Igor Stravinsky and a libretto by Jean Cocteau. It is available on videodisk.

# Topics for Further Study

Read or review the masterpieces of Greek tragedy and Greek comedy. How are these plays alike? How are they different? Which do you think most represents Greek culture in the fifth century B.C.?

Compare and contrast the features of Old Comedy and New Comedy. Which of these forms seems more relevant to modern drama? Explain your answer.

Read Aristotle's *Poetics* and apply his analysis of tragedy to a play of your choosing.

Read Plato's *Republic*, in which he discusses his ideas about tragedy and its place in society. Out of what philosophical ideas does Plato's argument arise? How valid is his argument?

Find out more about life in ancient Greece in the fifth century B.C. Based on your research, decide if Greek tragedies or comedies would have been more meaningful to fifth-century audiences.

Trace the history of drama throughout the ages or in one specific period, such as the Elizabethan period or the French neoclassical period. How did the works and ideas of the Greek playwrights influence these later movements?

Find out more about the Peloponnesian War, which Aristophanes took as the backdrop for most of his plays. How do you think the ongoing strife might have affected Athenian society, and how might this have been reflected in Aristophanes' comedies?

Find out more about the rise of Athenian democracy. Then investigate one or more of the Greek plays to see how new ideas about government are referenced in these plays.

# Compare and Contrast

**500s B.C.**: During this century, Athens becomes the dominant power of the Greek city-states and achieves its greatest economic prosperity and cultural flowering. The Golden Age of Greece sees Athens emerge as the center of the arts.

**Today:** Athens dominates Greek political, cultural, and economic life. About four million people, some 40 percent of the population, live in the city's metropolitan area. Modern Athens is filled with ruins and reminders of the city's ancient glory.

**500s B.C.**: The Greeks believe in a pantheon of twelve gods who live atop Mount Olympus. The gods are seen as powerful beings who do not readily overlook any slights to their honor. Some actions that most offend the gods include a lack of hospitality, lack of proper burial for family members, human arrogance, and murderous violence.

**Today:** The ancient Greek religion held sway until about the fourth century A.D., when Christianity spread to the region. Today, all but a small minority of Greeks are members of the Church of Greece, or the Greek Orthodox Church. However, Greeks still maintain pride in the myths of the past.

**500s B.C.**: Around 508 B.C., Cleisthenes overthrows the aristocrats who rule Athens and turns the city into a direct democracy. An assembly called the Council of Five Hundred□chosen from local government units□makes the laws, and a court system in which people are tried by a jury of citizens is implemented. In the midfifth century B.C., Pericles opens public offices to all male citizens and provides that officeholders be paid, thus making it possible for nonwealthy men to serve in government.

**Today:** Greece is a parliamentary republic. Parliament consists of three hundred deputies, and its members are elected for four-year terms by direct, universal, and secret ballots. The prime minister holds extensive power but must be able to command the confidence of the parliament.

# What Do I Read Next?

Aristotle's *Poetics* is the first critical work focusing on tragedy as an art form. Written about 380 B.C., the *Poetics* provides an extensive analysis of the genre.

Eugene O'Neill is considered to be one of the few modern American tragedians. His *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1932), a trilogy, is a reworking of the *Oresteia* trilogy. It is set in Puritan New England during the Civil War. O'Neill wanted to create a modern psychological tragedy that utilized the mythology and legend of ancient Greece.

Several post-World War II French writers have attempted to revitalize the Greek tragedy through more contemporary plays. Jean-Paul Sartre's *Flies* (1943) is based on *Eumenides*, the final play of the *Oresteia* trilogy. Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* (1942) is based on Sophocles' play of the same name. In both plays, political ideals and rebellions are used instead of religious ideals and actions.

Opera arose out of ancient Greek tragedy. Many of the greatest operas, such as Clause Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, are based on the plays and myths of ancient Greece.

Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872) argues that Greek tragedy arose out of a fusion of Apollonian and Dionysian elements. Apollonian elements represent measure, restraint, and harmony, and Dionysian elements represent unrestrained passion. Nietzsche also believes that Socratic rationalism and optimism brought about the end of Greek tragedy.

# Further Study

Ferguson, John, *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*, University of Texas Press, 1972.

This book is useful in understanding the basic themes of Greek tragedy as well as the individual plays and playwrights.

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This narrative history provides a solid overview of ancient Greece, focusing on the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.

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Nardo compiles excerpts from salient texts about Greek drama, including articles that cover the development of Greek drama, the tragedies, the comedies, and Greek drama in the modern world.

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This book explores the cultural elements that went into the creation of Greek tragedies.

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BOOKRAGS

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**Introduction**

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literary Movements for Students (LMfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, LMfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on

□classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of LMfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of LMfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in LMfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by LMfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

LMfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Literary Movements for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LMfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LMfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Literary Movements for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from LMfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Literary Movements for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Literary Movements for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of LMfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Literary Movements for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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