

# **CLASSICISM (GREEK LITERATURE) AND ITS IMPACT ON ENGLISH LITERATURE**

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**Module-9**

**SEMESTER-I**  
**PAPER-V: WESTERN LITERARY HISTORY-I**

**Time: 3 Hours**

**Max. Marks: 80**

**Instructions for the Paper Setters:-**

Eight questions of 16 marks are to be set, two in each of the four Sections (A-D). Questions may be subdivided into parts (not exceeding four). Candidates are required to attempt five questions, selecting at least one question from each Section. The fifth question may be attempted from any Section.

**SECTION-A**

**Background**

**Classicism**

Medievalism

The Renaissance

Enlightenment

Neoclassicism

Romanticism

**SECTION-B**

**Drama**

**Classical Drama**

(*Poetics*, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Menander, Plautus, Terence, Seneca)

**Medieval Drama**

(Mysteries, Miracles, Moralities, Interludes)

**Renaissance Drama**

(University Wits, Shakespeare, Comedy of Humours, Jacobean Drama)

**Neoclassical and Romantic Drama**

(British Restoration Drama, French Neoclassical Drama, German *Sturm und Drang*)

**SECTION-C**

**Poetry**

**Classical Poetry**

(Homer, Hesiod, Sappho, Pindar, Theocritus, Virgil, Catullus, Horace, Ovid, Juvenal)

**Medieval Poetry**

(Old English Poetry, Romances, Allegories, Ballads, Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Chaucer and his contemporaries)

**Renaissance Poetry**

(Spenser, Sidney, Shakespeare, Donne and the Metaphysicals, Cavalier Poetry, Milton)

**Neoclassical Poetry**

(Dryden, Pope, Johnson, Poetic Diction, Transition Poets)

### **Romantic Poetry**

(Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Poe, Whitman, Dickinson)

## **SECTION-D**

### **Fiction**

#### **Rise of the Novel**

(Precursors, Renaissance Fictional Prose, Cervantes, Aphra Behn, Reasons for the rise of the novel)

#### **Eighteenth Century British Novel**

(Sub Genres: Picaresque, Epistolary, Sentimental, Gothic; Defoe, Swift, Richardson, Fielding, Smollett, Sterne, Walpole, Radcliffe)

#### **Eighteenth Century French and German Novel**

(Voltaire, Rousseau, Goethe)

#### **British Romantic Novel**

(Austen, Scott)

### **Suggested Sources:**

1. Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*
2. Alexander, Michael. *A History of English Literature*
3. Cohen, J.M. *A History of Western Literature*
4. Cuddon, J.A. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms*
5. Evans, Ifor. *A Short History of English Literature*
6. Hornstein, L.H et al. *The Reader's Companion to World Literature.*
7. Spiller, Robert E. *Cycle of American Literature.*
8. Encyclopedia Britannica (CD ROM)

**Q : Write a note on the classical background of Greek literature [1000 BC – 200 BC] and its impact on English literature.**

**Ans : Greece: A Place of Many Beginnings**

Life in ancient Greece must have been interesting, for on that small rocky peninsula<sup>1</sup> at the edge of the European continent, the Greeks made for themselves a place of many beginnings. Surrounded by barbarian<sup>2</sup> tribes, they left their deep mark in history with their inquiry, imaginative mind, and beautiful and precise<sup>3</sup> language. Knowing nothing of the past, they themselves created a vast body of folk tradition. Ignorant of geography, they sailed their ships into the unknown Mediterranean<sup>4</sup>. They loved games and relished<sup>5</sup> learning. Their gods they made in their own image — expedient<sup>6</sup>, quarrelsome, witty, and wise. Their small city-states were models of government upon which our own is based.

### **The Western World Goes to Greece for Everything — Literature, Philosophy, Science, etc**

The Greek civilization was great civilization. More men of genius lived in Athens<sup>7</sup> than the world has ever seen since in any other place at one time. They brought to perfection a literature and a style of architecture which have left deep imprints on the arts of different civilizations for more than two thousand years. They discovered principles and invented systems, and so laid the foundations of philosophy, natural science, mathematics, medicine, etc. It has been truly said that the Western world goes back to Greece for everything but (except) its religious faith.

### **Background of Myths and Heroic Legends**

The Greeks were very practical and realistic people. They never let anything in mysticism. In their need to understand the world they lived in, they created myths to explain the origins of things and to account for<sup>8</sup> why life must be as it is. Stories like those of Pandora's Box, Cupid and Psyche, Icarus, Oedipus, Ulysses, etc are never childish; they are filled with beauty and wisdom. Also in the oral tradition were tales of legendary heroes and tribal history such as the labour of Hercules, the expedition against Troy, etc. Out of this background of myths and heroic legends came the two great Homeric epics — The Iliad and Odyssey.

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<sup>1</sup>**peninsula** - a piece of land projecting out into a sea or lake.

<sup>2</sup>**barbarian** - savage tribes from the North.

<sup>3</sup>**precise**- exact and accurate.

<sup>4</sup>**Mediterranean** - the sea surrounding Greece.

<sup>5</sup>**relish** - to enjoy.

<sup>6</sup>**expedient** - practical, although possibly immoral.

<sup>7</sup>**Athens** - the capital of Greece.

<sup>8</sup>**account for**- to narrate or explain.

## The Epic Poems

Whether Homer was one man or ten is a secret lost in the shadowy past. What is more important is that the two stories told in his name survive, as fresh and vivid as they were thousands of years ago. To citizens of Greek city-states, who had known many assaults<sup>9</sup> and sieges<sup>10</sup>, The Iliad was a great epic of battles. Beginning in the tenth year of the war with Troy, it tells of Achilles' terrible wrath<sup>11</sup>, the death of Hector, Ulysses' involvement in the war, gods at home in the human world, and at the same time lifting men almost to the stature of gods. Thus, it is a tale of violence and doom, compassion and grief both earthly and divine.

If The Iliad is the tragic epic of man's ambition for conquest and glory, Odyssey is a romantic epic dealing with man's desire for peace and home. Crafty Ulysses is the hero of this epic which narrates his various exploits<sup>12</sup> during his ten years of wandering after the fall of Troy. He emerges triumphant over every disastrous situation he comes across during his wanderings. His reward at the end is the comfort of his own hearth<sup>13</sup> and the love of Penelope, his faithful spouse<sup>14</sup>.

Thus these epics are a storehouse of literature, history, religious traditions, social customs, and moral instructions as Homer touches upon whatever is universal in human thought and deed. Greece produced other poets also, but Homer was their master writer who remains a great poet for all moods and all ages to come.

## The Lyric Poems

Greece also produced great lyric poets like Pindar, Sappho, Hesiod, and Theocritus, to name a few. The odes of Pindar and love poems of Sappho have long been models for European poets.

## The Tragedies

The Greeks excelled in drama also. In Greek tragedy, the most important themes were related to man as human. Even today these themes are used in modern tragedy. Aeschylus is the first of the Greek writers of tragedy. His work is filled with pride of the country, poetic grandeur, and tragic insight. Of his seven surviving plays, the most interesting is Agamemnon which details the homecoming of Agamemnon, King of Argos, from the Trojan War. Waiting at home for him is his wife, Clytemnestra, who has been planning his murder as a revenge for the sacrifice of their daughter, Iphigenia. The ending of the play includes a prediction of the return of Orestes, son of

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<sup>9</sup>**assault** - attack.

<sup>10</sup>**siege** - a military operation in which an army tries to capture a town by surrounding it.

<sup>11</sup>**wrath** - rage; fury.

<sup>12</sup>**exploits** - adventures; deeds.

<sup>13</sup>**hearth** - sweet home.

<sup>14</sup>**spouse** - wife.

Agamemnon, who will seek to avenge his father. Equally powerful is Prometheus Bound which relates the story of the titan who stole fire from the gods and gave it to mankind.

Sophocles is the humanist among Greek playwrights. He is more restrained in his treatment of the problem of evil and divine retribution<sup>15</sup>. The most famous tragedies of Sophocles feature Oedipus and Antigone. They are generally known as the Theban plays. He developed his characters to a greater extent than earlier playwrights such as Aeschylus. Even Aristophanes, who mocked almost everyone and everything, paid him high tribute when he showed Sophocles in the underworld in one of his comedies.

Euripides, the third of the tragic dramatists, lived in a later age when faith in the gods was waning<sup>16</sup> and scepticism and speculative<sup>17</sup> philosophy had begun to weaken traditional morality. Lacking the religious fervour of Aeschylus and the moral serenity of Sophocles, he came closer to realistic study of personality. In his tragedies, like Medea, he presented the fatal flaws of character as the secret of man's tragic destiny.

However, behind all these tragedies is deep concern with the fate that pursues mankind, and which is a subject of perennial<sup>18</sup> interest to writers of all periods. Modern writers have also found in Greek tragedies the themes and symbols for their own work and many of them modelled their works on Greek tragedies. Thomas Hardy (the role of fate and chance in almost all his novels), W. B. Yeats (his use of Greek myths, e.g. in his poem 'Leda and the Swan'), and Eugene O'Neill (whose Morning Becomes Electra is purely like a Greek tragedy) are among modern writers who have found in Greek drama the themes and symbols for their own novels, poetry, and plays.

### The Comedies

The lighter side of Greek drama found expression in comedy. Aristophanes is known as the father of comedy. He was a prolific<sup>19</sup> and much acclaimed comic playwright of ancient Athens. He was the master of irreverence<sup>20</sup> and satire. Eleven of his forty plays survive virtually complete. These, together with fragments of some of his other plays, provide the only real examples of a genre of comic drama, and they are in fact used to define this genre. Aristophanes has been said to recreate the life of ancient Athens more convincingly than any other author. His power of ridicule was feared and acknowledged even by his influential contemporaries. In The Frogs, he shows his artistic rivalry and satirizes artists; in The Clouds, he ridicules philosophers; in The Birds, he satirizes Greek gods; and in The Knights, he ridicules the

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<sup>15</sup> **retribution** - vengeance; justice.

<sup>16</sup> **waning** - fading; weakening.

<sup>17</sup> **speculative** - uncertain; unpredictable.

<sup>18</sup> **perennial** - recurrent; lasting.

<sup>19</sup> **prolific** - very productive.

<sup>20</sup> **irreverence** - disrespect; mockery.

politicians. However, there is a serious purpose beneath his hilarious comedies, as he pleads for morality in private and public life of the earliest democracy of the world, i.e. Greece.

## **The Philosophy**

Among the glories of Greece were the great minds it produced. To name a few of them are thinkers and philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle who exert great influence on the western civilization. Their writings form the basis of the much of political and moral thought of even the present day. Our knowledge of Socrates we get chiefly from the writings of Plato, his pupil and friend. What we owe most to Socrates is his method of teaching, the interchange of questions and answers which go deeply into the heart of a problem.

Plato is famous for his The Republic, an epic of political philosophy in twelve books. His conception of the ideal state, as outlined in it, is still the foundation of modern political theory. In fact, he gave form to abstract thought. His views on love, friendship, and ethics<sup>21</sup> are among the world's most precious possessions. His other writings, The Apology and Phaedo, are in the dialogue form and deal with the trial and death of Socrates.

Aristotle was the student of Plato and the teacher of Alexander the Great. The modern world is indebted to him the most. His writings cover many subjects including physics and metaphysics, theatre and music, logic and science, rhetoric and aesthetics, poetry and linguistics, government and politics, ethics and morality, religion and theology, biology and zoology. Together with Plato and Socrates (Plato's teacher), Aristotle is one of the most important founding figures in Western philosophy. Aristotle's writings were the first to create a comprehensive system of Western philosophy. In the field of literary criticism, he discusses the concept of ideal tragedy in his Poetics. In it he rejects the views of Plato that poets must not be included in an ideal state. [Plato's charges against poets and poetry in The Republic, and Aristotle's defence of it in the Poetics.]

## **The Histories**

Since Greeks were truly interested in every human activity, we find some famous historians also among them. They found their first historian in Herodotus. His history of the wars between Greeks and Persians is more than a chronicle of events for he was a student of mankind and poured into his books a flood of informative detail, anecdotes, and hearsay bringing life to his pages. He is a great storyteller among historians and his portrayal of the Greek states against a wider background of world culture gives us a clear picture of history of the time.

Another historian, Thucydides, with his History of the Peloponnesian War recounts the 5th century BC war between Sparta and Athens. His narration is largely eyewitness account of

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<sup>21</sup>**ethics** - the branch of philosophy dealing with the concept of good and bad.

the war. Thucydides has been dubbed the father of 'scientific history', because of his strict standards of evidence-gathering and analysis in terms of cause and effect without reference to intervention by the gods. He has also been called the father of the school of thought which views the relations between nations as based on might rather than right. His classical texts are still studied at advanced military colleges worldwide.

Still another, Xenophon also wrote as a participant in the events he describes. He was a general in the famous army of ten thousand Greeks during their retreat from Persia, as told in his Anabasis.

### **Conclusion**

It will not be incorrect if we say that English literature has its beginning in Greece. From 900 BC to 300 BC, Greek civilization had its best period. Much of the literature of ancient Greeks still remains the best in any language.