

# The Impact of Christianity, Roman and Greek literature, and realism on narrative forms

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## Abstract

Every piece of work related to literature shelters much evidence about the social, economical, cultural and the philosophical changes of the period. Apart from those evidences, the dominant belief system of the period also shapes the usage of language and also the work's itself. In this article, the impact of Christianity, Roman and Greek literature, and realism on narrative forms will be handled, and the thesis will be strengthen via sample part of literary works.

**Key Words:** Literature, Christianity, Roman and Greek Literature and Realism.

## Hristiyanlık, Roma ve Yunan edebiyatı ve realizm'in anlatım formları üzerindeki etkisi

## Özet

Edebiyata dair her eser, dönemin sosyal, ekonomik, kültürel ve filozofik değişimlerine dair bir çok kanıt içide barındırır. Bu kanıtların yanı sıra, dönemin baskın inanç sistemi dili ve yapıtın kendisini şekillendirir. Bu makalede, Hristiyanlık, Roma ve Yunan Edebiyatı ve Realizm'in anlatım formları üzerindeki etkisi ele alınacak ve bu tez edebi eserlerden alınan örnek parçalarla güçlendirilecektir. Anahtar Kelimeler: Edebiyat, Hristiyanlık, Roma ve Yunan Edebiyatı ve Realizm

## Introduction

In every political, social, economical, cultural and philosophical developments in the society affects its process of literature and its narrative forms. By examining the literary works, people can learn the main effects on narratives. It is impossible to comprehend the Early Western Literature without referring to Bible or Christianity, the Roman and Greek Literature and elements of Realism. Since every action of human life is told in the Bible, it is accepted as an inseparable part of Western life and literature. Bible writes that "if people do not know about Christianity, they wouldn't know Western Culture". Because of its focus on everyday life and people, after a short time accomplished to be the subject matter of Western narratives. Besides Christianity, Roman and Greek Literatures also form the basis of Early Western Literature. Homer, Sophokles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Herodot, Plato, Aristotle were some of the influential figures in narrative forms, and produced well-known works throughout the country. Lastly, realism influenced the narrative forms of Early Western Literature. People had the chance to come across with the ordinary life scenes and characters in the narratives. They identified their lives with the characters in books. Realism gave a new way to literature and focused on real life matters rather than fictional. Since Early Western

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Literature resembles a melting pot of various narratives, it can only be analyzed and understood with the impacts of Christianity, Roman and Greek Literature, and Realism.

The Bible itself is responsible for much of the language, literature, and fine arts in the Early Western literature and most of the artists, composers were heavily affected by its writings. Alvin J. Schmidt explains the deep impact of Christianity on the development of Western Civilization by those words:

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

The English language also includes many words and phrases taken from the Bible. A famous scholar on the literature of the Bible, Alistair McGrath tells in *Christian Theology*, “Without the King James Bible, there would have been no *Paradise Lost*, no *Pilgrim’s Progress*, no Handel’s *Messiah*, no Negro spirituals, and no Gettysburg Address” (McGrath, 12). It means most of the writers, artists, and musicians over the centuries have been greatly influenced by the Bible and formed narrative forms in light of its content.

From Dante to Milton to Dostoyevsky, the words and subject matters found in the Scriptures have made their way into much of the literature. For example, Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* is an example of allegory which focus on personal salvation and considered as a guide to the Christian life. The book is written in a straightforward narrative and shows the influence of Christianity with its original structure. Other great writers in the history of Western Civilization include Chaucer, William Shakespeare, John Donne, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, William Blake, T.S. Eliot, and William Faulkner also benefited from Bible and their works and narratives have the reflections of Christianity.

Besides novels, drama also affected by Christianity. A well-known church drama in the tenth century was *The Visit to [Christ’s] Sepulcher*. It has greatly been influenced by the words of the Bible; most of the time the music and themes that are used in it directly reflected that influence. Apart from the works of famous intellectuals, history books are also filled with the profound details of men and women whose lives were changed by Jesus Christ and those issues impacted the world to a great extent. A famous intellectual called Alvin Schmidt says “To deny the influence of Christianity on Western Civilization is to deny history altogether” (Schmidt, 47). The oral tradition was very strong in early Western culture and most literary works were written to be performed. Epic poems were thus very popular, including *Beowulf*. There are some references to Christian and Pagan beliefs in it. One example of these Pagan beliefs is the attitude taken about revenge. In *Beowulf*, there is a different approach to revenge. If your friend was killed there, you have the right to take revenge. This can be understood by *Beowulf*’s best known sentence, "Better a man should avenge his friend than mourn much". As it is seen, there are many references to Christian beliefs. In the poem, when it is being explained where Grendel came from, Grendel is referenced as a "hellish enemy". The poem also says, God condemned them as kin of Cain. This demonstrates that the poet had at least some Christian education since he referred Grendel to kin of Cain, who is a well-known person from the Bible. *Beowulf* also acts like a savior much like Jesus did. Another example is that, *Beowulf* acts like a savior is when he does battle with the dragon. *Beowulf* shows different Pagan and Christian beliefs throughout the story by his attitude towards revenge, by his love for material possessions and by playing the savior throughout the book. Furthermore, Goethe's *Faust* is the

mixture of theology and Romanticism. Although it is not considered as a Christian work, its mysticism shows that it has a Christian background. The Christian elements in *Faust* may be seen as vague; but when it is read carefully, all of the elements are clear. For example, the only unforgivable sin in *Faust* is to stop struggling. There are a number of religious debate poems in the Early Western Literature. The longest is *Christ and Satan* which deals with the conflict between Christ and Satan during the forty days in the desert. One of the earliest another text in prose is the *Martyrology*, which gives information about saints and martyrs according to their anniversaries and feasts in the church calendar.

Poets such as Edmund Spenser and John Milton also produced works that demonstrated an increased interest in understanding Christian beliefs. Edmund Spenser told the allegorical representation of the Tudor Dynasty in *The Faerie Queen*; John Milton also retold of mankind's fall from paradise in *Paradise Lost*. Christopher Marlowe and William Shakespeare produced works which took the themes from Bible such as life, death, and history.

Secondly, Greek and Roman literature moulded the Early Western literature to a great extent. Despite the excessive changes in English, most of the works referred to Latin language and some of the famous expressions of Romans. Greeks invented most of the narrative forms such as tragedy and comedy, epic and romance which are considered the products of creativity and affected millions of people. Greeks produced lots of works which are focused on love, daily life, religion in preclassical, classical, Hellenistic-Roman, and Byzantine periods. Romans influenced by the themes and narrative patterns of them and used those literary figures by developing and mixing much of their own. Most of the Europeans were illiterate during the Dark Ages. But people who can read and write contributed a lot to Western literature by mixing Christian values with Greek and Roman figures. As well as Old English, people also benefited from the stories of Greek and Roman culture to entertain people. They told the well-known stories, like the murder of Caesar or the fate of Oedipus from those cultures. By means of Greek culture, Western literature had the chance to explain what the tragedy and comedy mean. In fact, what the Western literature had done is a part of imitation of Greek and Roman literature. Alfred North Whitehead who is a mathematician said about that "all philosophy is but a footnote to Plato". Apart from those, Western Literature comprehended the real meaning of epics by means of Homer who is the creator of the 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey'. The 'Iliad' is pure tragedy, but the 'Odyssey' is a mixture of tragedy and comedy. Both of these works were focused on ancient legends. Since narrative targeted to communicate with the audience the language is simple, direct, and appealing. One of the great poets of Greek culture named Hesiod also affected the western narrative forms.. He contributed the usage of daily issues in literature by telling the low standard of lives in the country. Greek accepted the works of Homer and Hesiod a kind of bible which have useful information in them. Readers learnt the heroic past from Homer and realities of ordinary life from Hesiod. Sappho and Pindar also considered as major figures in poetry and millions wanted to write like them. Sappho wrote especially about personal problems and emphasized and reminded the importance of individual in literary works. Pindar is also considered as an influential figure in Western literature because of symbolising the transition from the preclassical to the classical age. Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides are authors of Greek Literature whose works survived for a long time. Aeschylus is famous for his trilogies; The 'Oresteia', 'Choephoroi', and 'Eumenides' is the well-known trilogy of him. Euripides gave the signals of realism by writing about real men and women instead of imaginary figures in his tragedies. Aristophanes Menander Plautus and Terence introduced comedy as a new narrative form and changed the understanding of Euripides by using imaginary characters in their works. Herodotus and Thucydides are the historians who used the prose in a proper way in Western

literature. 'History of the Peloponnesian War' by Hucydides is assumed as an important historical document in the Early Western literature. Moreover, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle made extraordinary efforts in prose and affected Western society. With the death of Aristotle, the classical era came on the threshold of unproductiveness. The Roman poet Virgil also wrote poetic plays as well as minor epics and lyric poems such as 'Aeneid'. The Divine Comedy, written by Dante includes many of Western literature's major figures and gave inspiration to famous figures such as Giovanni Boccaccio, Geoffrey Chaucer, John Milton, William Blake; Victor Hugo; Joseph Conrad; James Joyce; Ezra Pound. After the capture of Constantinople by the Turks, Greek national life and culture came to an end for centuries, as did literary production. Shortly, it is impossible to discuss the narratives of Western Literature without referring to the Greeks and Romans.

Thirdly, the depiction of Realism influenced the narrative forms of Western literature. Although it is considered as a new phenomenon, in fact realism goes toward back to the early periods of humanity. The Bible itself reflected the details of everyday life. Thus, it caused many of the writers of that period use the ordinary people such as peasants, slaves, merchants in well-known structures (home, shop, field, store) in literature. In some ways, the New Testament also depicted the everyday life by telling it from men and women's eyes. The rise of realism changed the mindset of Westerners because they thought the characters and events were more real and amazing in the Bible than the fictional structure of Greek or Roman literature. But; some of the works of Greek and Roman culture even has some depictions of reality with its sharp narrative. Homer with his Odysseus reflects the details of the room, the characters, and the scar on Odysseus' leg. Homer's attention to detail, can be considered as the signals of fondation of reality in narrative. The realism concept expose to some restriction in those early periods because his characters have no development Odysseus is the before and after he returns from his journey. The main target of his narrative is dulce et utility ( art should sweet and teach); and also to cause the reader to get in touch with his reality. In fact, Homer explores the individual and the self rather than ideal with his realistic context. Greek and Roman Literature preferred to reflect reality with narrative forms such as comedy and tragedy. Ordinary events of life, and people were depicted in only comedies. Aristocratic people found tragedies appropriate to reflect their luxurious life styles. Chivalric or Romantic literature also gave a new way to the realistic background of Western Literature. They contributed to a widespread culture of love. Although Romance seems as making sense only about individualism rather than realism, the persuasiveness of characters can only be depicted with realistic context. Thus, we can not think individualism apart from realism. *Don Quixote* by Cervantes also explores the everyday character in a place where nothing is out of touch with reality. Don Quixote forces the readers to create an image on their minds by witnessing the artificiality of chivalric tradition and contributed to the realistic representation men. Although romantic writers such as Dostoyevsky, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce examined the irrational side of human nature, they contributed a lot to the psychological realism. With the excessive contributions of them, narratives emphasized internal realities rather than external. James Joyce's *Ulysses* explored nature of human consciousness and irrational side of it and considered as the symbol of nature of human consciousness. Boccaccio's *The Decameron* also refers to colorful life styles of people with the usage of realistic characters and narrative. For example, the reader personalizes the characters by witnessing their real environment and experiences. John Dwyer says about that Boccaccio's characters "live on earth, and only on earth,"(Dwyer, 17) to depict the contributions of Boccaccio to realistic literature in the West Culture. Eric Auerbach defines realism in Westen literature as mimesis of everyday life. The name of his book demonstrates his aim: *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality inWestern Literature*. He analyses a huge number of narratives from Homer to VirginiaWoolf to see how they imitate everyday life.

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In conclusion, it can be put forward that throughout the centuries Western Literature and its narrative forms exposed to various changes with the rapid transformations in the society and world. Those transformations forced people to change their reading habits in literature. They sometimes enjoyed reading fictional narratives to forget the stress of outer world or sometimes preferred reading realistic genres to come the realities of life. Whatever the reason, their lives and also the structures of literature were shaped with the main elements such as Christianity, Greek and Roman Literature, and Realism. All of those figures created different dimensions in particular periods by penetrating the inner parts of masterpieces. Thus, the Early Western Literature cannot be thought apart because of the invaluable impacts of those figures on narrative forms.

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