

Classical Literature: A Very Short Introduction

By William Allan

The classical world and its literary masterpieces – from authors such as Homer, Herodotus, and Ovid – have fascinated readers for centuries. In this *Very Short Introduction* William Allan provides a concise history of the major genres, authors, and periods of classical literature. Exploring what the ‘classics’ are and illustrating the variety and sophistication of these works, he looks at how and why they have shaped the Western concept of literature.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

- As a modern reader, do you find it difficult to relate to texts from such a different time and culture?
- Do you agree that it is almost impossible to write outside a genre?
- Does the tiny fraction of surviving texts from the classical period make it pointless to generalize about ancient literature?
- Does what constitutes a ‘hero’ in classical epic and tragedy surprise you?
- What constitutes an ‘epic’ work of literature today? Is it more than just length?
- Does personal poetry, e.g. love poetry or invective, have to be based on personal experience?
- Why do we enjoy the spectacle of human suffering in tragedy?
- How do the stock figures of Greek and Roman comedy compare to those of modern comedy?
- Are the literary techniques used by ancient historians, e.g. imaginative descriptions and invented speeches, incompatible with the search for historical truth?
- Were the Romans right to believe that the role of history is to provide moral lessons?
- In the age of the sound-bite and spin-doctor, is it possible to appreciate political rhetoric?
- Why do city-dwellers still idealize the countryside?
- How important is anger to contemporary satire?
- Who or what are the most popular targets of satire today and how do they compare to those of the ancient genre?
- Why does the ancient novel deal so much with romance and escapism?
- Why do some ancient genres have modern equivalents while others do not?

Other books by William Allan

The Andromache and Euripidean Tragedy (Oxford University Press, 2000)

Euripides: The Children of Heracles (Aris and Phillips, 2001)

Euripides: Medea (Duckworth, 2002)

Euripides: Helen (Cambridge University Press, 2008)

Homer: The Iliad (Bloomsbury Academic, 2012)