

**CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY AS A FOUNDATION OF MODERN LITERARY THOUGHT:
CLASSICAL IMAGES AND MOTIFS IN THE WORKS OF ALBERT CAMUS AND
EASTERN MODERN PROSE**

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Abstract: This article examines classical antiquity's influence on modern literature, analyzing how Albert Camus and Eastern writers reinterpret Greek myths and classical motifs to address contemporary existential and philosophical questions.

Keywords: classical antiquity, Albert Camus, Eastern modern prose, Greek mythology, classical motifs, literary tradition, existentialism, comparative literature, cultural synthesis, myth adaptation

Classical antiquity represents an inexhaustible wellspring of images, motifs, philosophical concepts, and narrative structures that continue to shape modern literary consciousness across diverse cultural traditions. The enduring presence of Greek and Roman mythology, tragic conventions, philosophical paradigms, and archetypal narratives in twentieth and twenty-first century literature transcends mere aesthetic borrowing, functioning instead as fundamental framework through which contemporary writers interrogate human existence, moral complexity, and civilizational crisis. This phenomenon proves particularly significant in the works of Albert Camus, whose engagement with classical myth constitutes essential dimension of his absurdist philosophy, and in Eastern modern prose, where writers from Japan, Turkey, Egypt, and Central Asia synthesize classical Western antiquity with indigenous literary traditions, creating unique hybrid forms addressing universal human concerns through culturally specific lenses.

The relationship between modern literature and classical sources operates through multiple mechanisms: direct mythological adaptation retelling ancient stories in contemporary contexts, thematic appropriation exploring classical philosophical questions through modern narratives, structural imitation employing tragic conventions and epic patterns, and symbolic reference using classical figures as metaphorical vehicles for contemporary meanings. This multilayered engagement reveals classical antiquity not as static historical repository but as living tradition continually reinterpreted to illuminate changing human circumstances. Understanding how disparate literary traditions—Western existentialism exemplified by Camus and diverse Eastern modernisms—engage classical heritage illuminates both continuities across world literature and distinctive cultural approaches to shared human questions.

Albert Camus's engagement with classical antiquity extends far beyond superficial allusion, constituting foundational element of his philosophical vision and literary methodology. Born in Algeria, educated in French colonial system emphasizing classical humanities, Camus absorbed Greek thought and mythology as formative intellectual influences shaping his mature existentialist philosophy. His philosophical essay "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942) exemplifies this relationship, transforming ancient Greek punishment myth into paradigmatic expression of absurdist condition. Sisyphus, condemned eternally to roll boulder uphill only to watch it tumble down, becomes for Camus archetypal absurd hero who finds meaning not through transcendent hope but through lucid

acceptance of meaningless struggle. Camus's famous conclusion—"One must imagine Sisyphus happy"—radically reinterprets classical myth, asserting human dignity resides in conscious revolt against absurdity rather than in achieving purpose or redemption.

This appropriation demonstrates characteristic modern engagement with classical material: retaining mythological structure while fundamentally transforming philosophical significance. Where ancient Greeks understood Sisyphus's punishment as divine justice for hubris, Camus strips away theological framework, presenting condition itself as metaphor for human existence devoid of inherent meaning. The eternal repetition signifies not punishment but fundamental human situation; happiness emerges from rebellion against meaninglessness through continued engagement rather than resignation or suicide. This transformation illustrates how classical myths provide narrative scaffolding enabling modern writers to articulate contemporary philosophical positions impossible within classical worldview itself.

Camus's novels similarly employ classical structures and motifs. "The Plague" (1947), while ostensibly depicting epidemic in Algerian city, functions as modern tragedy exploring collective human response to arbitrary suffering. The narrative structure echoes Greek tragic conventions: inexorable catastrophe descending on community, characters facing impossible ethical choices, chorus-like collective consciousness, and resolution through acceptance rather than triumph. Character archetypes recall classical models: Dr. Rieux as rationalist hero maintaining dignity through action despite meaninglessness, Father Paneloux as religious interpreter seeking divine meaning in suffering, Tarrou as philosophical questioner pursuing ethical purity. The plague itself operates as modern equivalent of classical fate—impersonal, inevitable, indifferent to human merit—forcing confrontation with mortality and absurdity.

"The Stranger" (1942) employs classical tragic irony and alienation. Protagonist Meursault's emotional detachment, his murder trial becoming examination of his failure to conform to social conventions, and his ultimate acceptance of death recall both Sophoclean tragic heroes undone by character traits and Stoic philosophical acceptance. The famous beach murder scene, where blinding Mediterranean sunlight triggers Meursault's action, invokes classical Greek understanding of environment and circumstance shaping human fate while simultaneously presenting modern psychological alienation. The trial sequence functions as modern agon, though stripped of tragic catharsis, presenting instead absurdist recognition that society judges not actions but conformity to emotional norms.

Camus's Mediterranean essays celebrate Hellenic sensibility—emphasis on present moment, physical beauty, measured balance—as antidote to Northern European nihilism and Christian otherworldliness. His concept of "Mediterranean thought" draws on pre-Socratic philosophy, particularly Heraclitus's flux and Parmenides's being, integrated with North African landscape and culture. This synthesis demonstrates how classical antiquity provides not only literary motifs but philosophical alternatives to dominant modern paradigms, enabling critiques of contemporary civilization through recovered ancient wisdom.

Eastern modern prose engages classical Western antiquity through distinctive cultural filters, creating hybrid forms synthesizing Greek and Roman materials with indigenous literary traditions, philosophical systems, and aesthetic principles. This encounter proves multifaceted: some writers employ classical references to assert participation in universal humanistic tradition transcending East-West divisions, others juxtapose classical Western and Eastern materials highlighting cultural

differences, still others use classical motifs to critique colonialism and cultural imperialism implicit in Western classical tradition's dominance.

Japanese modernist writers exemplify sophisticated engagement with classical sources. Yukio Mishima's "The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea" (1963) transforms Greek tragic structure into exploration of post-war Japanese identity crisis, employing Dionysian-Apollonian dialectic from Nietzsche's classical interpretation to examine tension between rational order and destructive passion. His tetralogy "The Sea of Fertility" extensively references transmigration concepts synthesizing Greek metempsychosis with Buddhist reincarnation, creating philosophical framework neither purely Western nor Eastern but deliberately hybrid. Kenzaburo Oe's "The Silent Cry" employs mythological patterns recalling both Greek tragedy and Japanese folklore, examining historical trauma through layered temporal structures indebted to classical epic conventions.

Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk's "My Name is Red" (1998) demonstrates postmodern engagement with classical ekphrasis tradition—detailed description of artworks—inherited from Homer through Byzantine chronicles, applied to Ottoman miniature painting. The novel's murder mystery structure recalls classical recognition patterns while interrogating cultural collision between Islamic artistic traditions and Western Renaissance classicism. Pamuk's later works increasingly reference classical philosophy, particularly Platonic idealism and Aristotelian aesthetics, examining their resonance and dissonance with Islamic philosophical traditions.

Egyptian modernists including Naguib Mahfouz employ classical tragic structures adapted to Egyptian settings. Mahfouz's "Thebes at War" explicitly retells ancient Egyptian resistance to Hyksos invasion using Greek tragic conventions, while his contemporary Cairo novels employ epic cataloguing techniques and tragic irony inherited from classical literature filtered through Arabic narrative traditions. The synthesis creates distinctively Egyptian modernism engaging universal human themes through culturally specific materials organized via classical Western structural principles.

Central Asian writers emerging from Soviet education system heavily emphasizing classical humanities demonstrate particular engagement with Greco-Roman materials. Chinghiz Aitmatov's "The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years" incorporates multiple mythological layers—Turkic legends, Soviet myths, and classical references—creating palimpsest structure examining cultural memory and historical trauma. His later works increasingly reference Prometheus myth, reinterpreting titan's rebellion as allegory for artistic freedom under totalitarianism, demonstrating how classical motifs provide politically coded language for contemporary critique.

The engagement extends to postcolonial contexts where classical references prove politically charged. Indian writers in English frequently reference classical mythology both Western and Indian, with some asserting equivalence between Greek and Sanskrit epics while others critique colonial education's privileging of European classics. Salman Rushdie's works exemplify this tension, deploying classical allusions while simultaneously satirizing their imperial associations, creating doubled discourse simultaneously participating in and critiquing Western literary canon.

Comparing Camus's engagement with classical antiquity to Eastern appropriations reveals both universal patterns and culturally specific approaches. Universal elements include: recognition of classical myths as repositories of archetypal human situations transcending historical specificity, employment of tragic structures to examine suffering and moral complexity, adaptation of epic

cataloguing and narrative techniques for modern purposes, and philosophical engagement with classical ethical systems addressing perennial questions.

Cultural specificities emerge in how classical materials interact with indigenous traditions. Camus, writing within French literary tradition already saturated with classical references, engages antiquity as inherited cultural patrimony requiring reinterpretation but not fundamental justification. Eastern writers often approach classical materials as simultaneously universal human heritage and specifically Western tradition requiring negotiation with indigenous alternatives. This doubled relationship generates creative tensions absent in Western appropriations, enabling critique of cultural hierarchies while participating in cross-cultural dialogue.

The philosophical dimension reveals significant divergence. Camus employs classical materials to articulate existentialist positions fundamentally opposed to classical worldviews, particularly regarding metaphysical meaning and cosmic justice. Eastern writers more frequently synthesize classical Western philosophy with indigenous systems—Buddhist non-attachment with Stoicism, Confucian social ethics with Aristotelian virtue ethics, Sufi mysticism with Neoplatonism—creating genuinely hybrid philosophical visions rather than simple appropriation.

Aesthetic approaches also differ. Western modernists including Camus typically employ classical forms to create ironic distance, using recognition of classical patterns to heighten awareness of modern deviations. Eastern writers more frequently treat classical and indigenous materials as equivalent resources, juxtaposing without necessary hierarchization, generating polyphonic rather than ironic effects. This reflects different relationships to literary tradition—Western anxiety of influence versus Eastern respect for multiple transmissions.

Classical antiquity's enduring influence on modern literary thought, exemplified in Albert Camus's existentialist appropriations and diverse Eastern engagements, demonstrates the remarkable adaptability and continued relevance of ancient materials for addressing contemporary concerns. Camus's transformation of classical myths into vehicles for absurdist philosophy illustrates how inherited narratives provide frameworks for articulating fundamentally new worldviews impossible within original contexts. His works demonstrate that classical engagement need not conserve ancient meanings but can radically reinterpret inherited materials for modern purposes.

Eastern modern prose reveals even greater diversity of approaches, from synthesizing classical Western and indigenous materials to critiquing cultural hierarchies embedded in classical tradition's reception. These varied engagements demonstrate classical antiquity's status not as monolithic Western property but as contested multicultural heritage open to multiple interpretations across global literary traditions.

The comparative analysis reveals that while classical materials provide shared reference points enabling cross-cultural dialogue, specific cultural contexts fundamentally shape how those materials function. Universal human themes expressed through classical myths gain particular inflections through distinctive cultural lenses, generating rich diversity within apparent commonality. This dual character—simultaneously universal and particular—explains classical antiquity's enduring vitality in modern world literature.

Understanding these engagements proves essential for comprehending modern literary development globally, revealing how seemingly disparate traditions participate in ongoing conversation with shared cultural heritage while maintaining distinctive identities. The continued creative appropriation of classical materials suggests their inexhaustible capacity to illuminate human condition across

radically different historical and cultural circumstances, ensuring their relevance for future literary generations worldwide.

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