

# Analysis of the Influence of Ancient Greek Mythology on British and American Literature

Mingyang Liu

Zhengzhou Foreign Language School Zhengzhou, Henan 450001

---

**Abstract:** Ancient Greek mythology is a treasure of world literature. It presents the social and spiritual life of ancient Greeks in the form of romantic epics, exerting a profound and lasting influence on English and American literature. This paper uses an inductive approach to explore the characteristics of ancient Greek mythology and English and American literature, further analyzing the impact of ancient Greek mythology on English and American literature. It focuses on key aspects such as vocabulary and idioms, writing styles, creative methods, intellectual content, and source materials in English and American literature. The influence of ancient Greek mythology on English and American literature is discussed.

**Keywords:** Ancient Greek mythology; English and American literature; Characteristics; Influence

---

Ancient Greek mythology is one of the Western mythological systems, covering all aspects of ancient Greek gods, heroes, nature, and cosmic history. It is the product of the spiritual beliefs of primitive tribal societies and the earliest literary form in Europe. English and American literature still retains the romantic and aestheticism of ancient Greek mythology, and has diversified from its foundation. The study of the influence of ancient Greek mythology on English and American literature has significant practical significance.

## 1. Literary Characteristics of Ancient Greek Mythology

### 1.1 Unique Artistic Expression

Ancient Greek mythology emphasizes storytelling and the presence of dramatic elements. It reflects the differences and commonalities between people in society through strong contrasts. Cleverly, this special artistic expression, such as exaggeration and romance, is most commonly used in the portrayal of character images in ancient Greek mythology. Therefore, we can see beautiful and elegant but fiercely jealous Hera, rebellious against tyranny and brave Prometheus, brave but stubborn Agamemnon, and the wise and beautiful Athena. These classic images in ancient Greek mythology have a strong reflection of human nature. People use these imaginary but seemingly real and highly secular humanistic images to reflect various aspects of the world and the ups and downs of the world. In addition, some character images represent prominent nobles in Greek society who enjoy pleasures, compete for power and profit, and are filled with strong jealousy and vanity even while awake. So, to some extent, incorporating the images from ancient Greek mythology into literature is more like a condemnation and criticism of society.

### 1.2 Characteristics of Harmonious Aesthetic Expression

The ancient Greeks loved beauty, and their concept and values of beauty were deeply rooted in their hearts. Therefore, in the literature of ancient Greek mythology, one can clearly feel the longing and love for life, as well as the tireless pursuit of beauty. It is worth mentioning that the literary creation of ancient Greek mythology is not only spiritual but also material, and it contains both reality and illusion. In ancient Greek mythology, the grandeur and beauty of nature are also vividly displayed, which also reflects the Greeks' pursuit of democracy and freedom. It can be said that ancient Greek mythology fully embodies the worship of beauty and forms a unique aesthetic realm. That is why so many writers in later generations seek creative inspiration from ancient Greek mythology - it is also the embodiment of the charm and distinctive features of literature. It should be a cultural heritage that humanity cherishes forever.

### 1.3 Symbol and Medium of English and American Literary Creation

English and American literature is inseparable from ancient Greek mythology. While providing models and themes for literary

creation, the intangible ancient Greek mythology deeply imprints on the spirits of the peoples of both countries. English and American writers have created a vast realm of ideas and enriched the cultures of both countries, presenting literature in various colors. Therefore, it is often said that to truly understand English and American literature, one must have a deep understanding of the underlying ancient Greek mythology. From the reflection of ancient Greek mythology on the history of myths to human society, people always connect myths to real-life within the same cultural context. Therefore, ancient Greek mythology serves as a common literary support and an advanced source of thought. Many English and American writers often use mythological narratives as the background for their own creations or as a prerequisite for literary creation. Most mythological stories are quoted in various literary works, making ancient Greek mythology appear as a symbol of English and American literature. The beautiful scenes in mythological stories add rich colors to the works, making them more appealing to readers and bringing a sense of moral beauty to literature.

#### **1.4 Romantic Atmosphere with a Mysterious Touch**

Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology revolve around love, exuding a strong romantic atmosphere. Characters in many works pursue love, work for love, without distinction. Many mythological stories provide insights, inspire reflection, and baptize the hearts of people, making them become kind and courageous individuals. The development of these stories often gives people a romantic yet realistic feeling.

## **2. The Influence of Ancient Greek Mythology on English and American Literature**

### **2.1 Influence on Vocabulary and Idioms**

Many words in modern English are derived from the names of gods in Greek mythology, and these words are still in use today. For example, “Titan” is a giant race that once ruled the world in Greek mythology. In modern English, “Titan” refers to a tall and strong person or a significant figure. The world-famous luxury cruise ship “Titanic” is named after this. Another example is “Morpheus,” the god of dreams in Greek mythology who governs people’s dreams. Derived from “Morpheus,” words such as “morphine” and “marijuana” exist in English. “Morphine” has sedative and analgesic effects. Furthermore, many idioms in English also have their origins in Greek mythology, carrying profound cultural connotations. For example, “Pandora’s box” refers to the source of disaster. Prometheus stole fire for humans, angering Zeus. Zeus decided to punish humanity by ordering Hephaestus, the god of fire, to create the first human woman out of clay and named her “Pandora.” The gods bestowed her with various gifts, making her irresistibly charming, and she was given to Prometheus’s younger brother Epimetheus as a punishment for Prometheus’s theft of fire. Later, Pandora, out of ignorance, opened the box, releasing all the disasters into the world. Thus, “Pandora’s box” became synonymous with “the source of disaster.” Another example is “Achilles’ heel,” which means a fatal weakness. Achilles was a Greek warrior, the son of the sea goddess and a mortal hero. After his birth, his mother held him by the heel and dipped him into the River Styx, making his entire body invulnerable except for his heel. However, he was shot in the heel and killed by Paris during the Trojan War. Therefore, “Achilles’ heel” generally refers to a fatal weakness or vulnerability. The term “Achilles tendon” also derives from this.

### **2.2 Influence on Writing Styles**

In ancient Greek mythology, each deity possesses distinct characteristics and governs different aspects. The divine realm, like the human world, has rulers, a governing order, and corresponding punishment mechanisms. Although each god possesses transcendent abilities, they cannot escape the fate of being punished for their mistakes. This realistic yet idealistic style of creation has had a profound impact on English and American literature. Moreover, English and American literature has further differentiated into different genres based on this foundation, further advancing the development of world literary history. Ancient Greek mythology has representatives of realism, such as Apollo, Zeus, and Athena, as well as representatives of romanticism, like Dionysus. These two distinct styles of creation derived from ancient Greek mythology have become the two main currents in English and American literature. Realism leans towards depicting society and life, adhering to the simple notion of art held by the ancient Greeks: “art is the direct representation or imitation of nature.” The literature of realism embodies no lies. Representative works include Guy de Maupassant’s “The Necklace,” Honoré de Balzac’s “La Comédie Humaine,” and Gustave Flaubert’s “Madame Bovary.” On the other hand, romanticism, in its expression of literary style, tends towards intuition and imagination. It possesses a fervent desire for an ideal world and shapes characters through elaborate imagination. This forms the romantic literary style in English and American literature, which is neither haphazard nor purely focused on accuracy.

### **2.3 Influence on Writing Methods**

Ancient Greek mythology heavily influenced the writing methods of English and American literature and provided inspiration for authors. For a period of time, ancient Greek mythology was an important foundation and element for English and American

literary creation. The Homeric epics are typical literary works with ancient Greek mythology as their core elements. They exhibit a plain and fluent language, clear and concise storylines, meticulous and tight structures, lively plots, and distinct character images. They are considered important works in Western literary history. The Homeric epics have had a profound influence on later English and American literary creation and served as models for many poets. The poems of Semonides were also created with ancient Greek elements. His writing style is solemn and concise, complementing the creative style found in ancient Greek mythology. Semonides excels in portraying vivid character images with simplicity, effectively evoking readers' empathy. During the Renaissance, the writing methods derived from ancient Greek literature reached another climax. Dante is a representative figure in this regard. His epic poem "The Divine Comedy" is based on ancient Greek elements while emphasizing contextual description and dialogue. Through dialogues between characters in hell, purgatory, and paradise, readers can gain insight into the brilliance of humanistic thought and the social conditions of the Renaissance era, making it of great research value.

## **2.4 Influence on Intellectual Content**

In addition to the strong presence of ancient Greek elements in its cultural characteristics, English and American literature has been greatly influenced by the characters in ancient Greek mythology in terms of its intellectual content. Ancient Greek mythology contains numerous romantic and aesthetic love stories, where amidst the beauty of love, there is always jealousy, suffering, and danger. It is only through experiencing these trials and tribulations that love can ultimately converge and thrive. Many works of English and American literature have continued this theme, such as Margaret Mitchell's "Gone with the Wind," Charlotte Bronte's "Jane Eyre," and Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice," among others. These novels break away from traditional sentimental and contrived themes of love, instead vividly reflecting social life and human nature at the time through character portrayals, depictions of customs, manners, spiritual concepts, and political attitudes. They employ direct and clear storylines to convey their content, more favoring accuracy in order to better express the emotions that the authors intend to convey. These novels emphasize the use of characters' inner monologues to clearly express their main ideas, providing readers with a richer space for imagination. Varied and diverse sentence structures make the expression of intellectual content more full and three-dimensional, further satisfying readers' needs.

## **3. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the development of English and American literature cannot be separated from the nourishment and impetus provided by ancient Greek mythology. Through it, we can witness a high degree of concentration in spiritual culture and a unity of beliefs among literary creators. Literary works enable us to gain insights into the human inner world, reason, order, and evoke emotional and spiritual resonance. This also offers important insights for better understanding the humanities and literary foundations, further analyzing the connection between ancient Greek mythology and English and American literature.

## **References:**

- [1] Hu Xiaoling. (2020). The Study on the Influence of Ancient Greek Mythology on British and American Literature[J]. The Young Writer, 2020(8): 157.
- [2] Zhao Ping. The Study on the Influence of Ancient Greek Mythology on British and American Literature[J]. Shanxi Archives, 2019(2): 174-177.
- [3] Jun-Yi G U , Chun-Ling Z .Influence and Expression of Ancient Greek and Roman Mythology on British and American Literature[J].Teaching of Forestry Region, 2018.