

Focus: Themes and structure
in Ancient Greek comedy

Agenda:

Novel group work
Introduction to Ancient Greek comedy

Homework: Continue reading your novel!

National Theatre Comedy and Satyr

Ancient Greek Comedy
(Lit terms info you will need!)

Modern movies such as *The Hangover*, *40 Year Old Virgin*, and *American Pie* owe a great deal to the Greeks. Why? Because playwrights invented the ever-popular but always controversial genre known as "the sex comedy." Of course, that's not what they were called during the days of Ancient Greece. Instead, they were known as satyr plays.

During the Festival of Dionysus, audiences would sit and watch three tragedies in a row. How depressing is that? So, to expunge the seriousness of the viewing experience, the evening would conclude with a satyr play. Thousands of years before there was *Saturday Night Live*, the playwrights of Ancient Greece were poking fun at the world around them. Very often, these comedies featured half-man / half-goat characters known as Satyrs. They were obnoxious, dim-witted, and usually drunk. And let's face it - these goat men were perverts. The Satyr characters lusted after everyone on stage, and they delivered the most humorous lines, often at the expense of others.

Written during the Peloponnesian War - a conflict Aristophanes felt was a pointless waste of human life, this comedy begins with the heroine, Lysistrata, explaining to her fellow women how to prevent their husbands from going off to battle:

LYSISTRATA: All we have to do is idly sit indoors
With smooth roses powdered on our cheeks,
Our bodies burning naked through the folds
Of shining Amorgos' silk, and meet the men
With our dear Venus-plats plucked trim and neat.
Their stirring love will rise up furiously,
They'll beg our arms to open. That's our time!
We'll disregard their knocking,
beat them off -- And they will soon be rabid for a Peace. I'm sure of it.

The plays of Ancient Greece ask questions that are still surprisingly relevant to our lives today:

- Should we follow the rule of law, or our own moral code?
- Do we have free will?
- How should we respond to injustice?

In the fifth century, the Greek tragic playwrights had acquired a significant following in Greek society. As a result, festival officials required that they present what became known as the 'satyr' play.

The Satyr Play

The satyr play was a short comedy that burlesqued a Greek myth. They were characterised by:

- A chorus of satyrs whose predominant function was to satirise the seriousness of the tragic plays by parodying gods, heroes, tragic dances, actions, conventions of acting, costumes and scenery.
- Satyrs wore goatskin loincloths with a phallus in the front and a horsetail at the rear. They also wore tight flesh coloured garments that in some way ridiculed tragic costumes.
- Some wore masks with fixed features and in the early satyr plays, the masks were not large. In later times, these masks would cover the entire head and were adorned with hair, beards and other ornaments.
- The chorus wore identical masks that represented animals whilst the actors wore masks that characterised human expressions.
- Characters that did not wear masks, had a snub nose, dark unkempt hair, a beard and pointed ears or they were completely bald and worn horns on the top of their heads.
- Action in this plays concentrated on lewd pantomime and buffoonery.
- One complete Greek satyr remains today, 'Cyclops' by Euripides. It is in essence a parody of the more serious story found in the 'Odyssey'.

