

# THE FORMATION OF THE ODE GENRE IN ANCIENT AND RENAISSANCE LITERATURE

Alimova Dilrabo Bahodirovna

Lecturer,

Westminster International University in Tashkent

dilrabo.alimova90@gmail.com

**Abstract.** The article discusses the genre of the ode, which developed in Western literature during the Classical and Renaissance periods, and its stages of evolution. It includes reflections on the distinctive features of odes created during these eras, as well as analyses of the odes written by poets of the Classical and Renaissance periods.

**Keywords.** ode, genre, praise, extol, chorus, music, tribute, love, friendship.

## Introduction.

An **ode** is a lyrical literary genre that emerged with the purpose of glorifying and praising human dignity, time, space, or reality. Throughout literary history, the ode has evolved as an important form of lyrical poetry. This genre was formed in ancient literature, particularly in the works of Greek and Latin poets. Writers such as *Pindar* and *Horace* composed in the ode genre, making significant contributions to its development. [1, 23] [8, 45].

## Methodology.

The origins of the ode trace back to ancient Greece. The word “ode” comes from the Greek “*ōdē*” or “*aedein*,” meaning “to sing” or “to sing in a chorus.” It originally referred to a choral song often performed alongside a dance. [2, 365]. Odes were also used in various political events as official and ceremonial songs performed by a group. For instance, in ancient times, odes were sung collectively to celebrate warriors and their heroism.

It is important to note that the earliest examples of odes in ancient times emerged as songs sung in unison during religious ceremonies. As a result, odes were often composed on religious and epic themes, including hymns dedicated to gods and heroes.

The development of the ode also has a distinctive historical background, as attitudes toward this genre varied depending on the socio-political environment. Thus, the stages of the ode’s formation and development are as follows:

**Ancient Era:** The ode genre originated during this period in Greek literature. Pindar, a Greek poet who lived between 518 and 438 BCE, introduced a choral form of the ode. However, before him, two Greek poets, *Alcaeus* and *Sappho*, who wrote monodies (odes for solo performance), also gained fame in this genre. They, too, lived and created in Pindar’s time, and their odes were sung by the public. However, in the history of literature, Pindar’s odes stood out for their originality. His odes were more structurally complex and thematically sophisticated, which contributed to their widespread popularity. Pindar’s odes are classified into four types in literary studies:

- A) **Olympian Odes:** Dedicated to athletes who won at the Olympic Games;
- B) **Pythian Odes:** Dedicated to the victors of the Pythian Games held in Delphi;
- C) **Nemean Odes:** Written for athletes who triumphed at the Nemean Games;
- D) **Isthmian Odes:** Honoring the winners of the Isthmian Games near Corinth.



A total of 45 of Pindar's odes have survived. These odes served as a foundation for the odes written in later periods. Pindar's odes were performed by a chorus, accompanied by musical instruments, and presented to the public. Most of Pindar's odes were written to celebrate athletes who had won at games, standing out for their ceremonial and epic style. [2, 110]. Pindar's First Olympian Ode was written in celebration of the victories of two chariot racers, Hieron and Syracusan, at the Olympic Games in 476 BCE:

Ἄριστον μὲν ὕδωρ: ἀργυρέας δὲ  
κεδνὸν ἐν νυκτὶ λαμπρὸν αἴθων  
άλιου κάλλιστον πυρὸς αἰθόμενον  
πλοῦτος ἐράται χρυσοῦ ἀνέρος. ἅ δὲ  
πότνια

Μοῖσα μείζονα σκόπει φάος ἀελίου,  
τὰς ἐν Ὀλυμπίᾳ νίκας στεφάνων τε,  
ὄθεν ἀβροχίτων αἶνος καὶ τὸ κατ'  
ἄκρον ἀγνὸν ἔδος ἱερᾶν εὐκαμάτων  
ἐπαινέων ἐξέπλετο τῶν μελέων:  
κοῦρος εὐτυχέστατος.

Best of all things is water; but gold, like a gleaming fire by night, outshines all pride of wealth beside. But, my heart, would you chant the glory of games, look never beyond the sun by day for any star shining brighter through the deserted air, nor any contest than Olympia greater to sing. It is thence that the song winds strands in the hearts of the skilled to celebrate the son of Kronos. They come their ways to the magnificent board of Hieron, who handles the scepter of dooms in Sicily, rich in flocks, reaping the crested heads of every excellence. [12:4]

Centuries later, the great Roman poet *Horace* significantly altered the structure of odes. Although inspired by Pindar's odes, Horace aimed to write odes that were shorter and more accessible in terms of content. His odes were simpler and more orderly compared to Pindar's complex compositions. Unlike Pindar's odes, Horace's odes were rarely performed at large public celebrations, as they focused more on personal emotions and experiences.

Themes such as love, friendship, and the joy of living life to the fullest were central to Horace's odes. He emphasized appreciating and cherishing the blessings of life and understanding one's self. His style was characterized by its elegance, which stood in contrast to Pindar's formal and glorifying depictions. Horace's philosophical ideas on self-awareness, inner emotions, and portrayals of love expanded the thematic range of the ode genre (4, 307).

Moreover, Horace's odes distanced themselves from the formality and ceremonial nature of earlier odes. His works were not written to be sung but to be read as poetry. Horace's odes inspired Roman poets such as *Catullus*, *Juvenal*, *Ovid*, and other prominent poets of his time, who also created their own odes in a similar style. However, their odes broadened in subject matter, covering themes like descriptions of lovers, freedom, and reflections on the times.

It is essential to note that Horace's odes reflected the concerns of his era. Therefore, they often touched on political issues, including war, peace, civic duty, and the standards of human conduct. While maintaining traditional themes, Horace also emphasized political matters in his works. For example, in "Ode 1.37," he praised the victory over Cleopatra VII by Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa at the Battle of Actium (September 2, 31 BCE) focusing on the dangers posed by Cleopatra and the political implications for Rome:

*Vix una sospes navis ab ignibus,  
Mentemque lymphatam*

there was scarcely one ship unhurt



*Mareotioredigit in veros timores  
Caesar ab Italia volantem*

by the flames,  
and Caesar Octavian returned her mind,  
crazy with Mareotic wine,  
to true fear, flying from Italy

*remis adurgens, accipiter velut  
mollis columbas aut leporem citus  
venator in campis nivalis  
Haemoniae, daret ut catenis [11]*

with straining oars, like a hawk  
[hunts] tender doves or a swift hunter  
[hunts] a hare on the plains of  
snowy Thessaly, to put in chains... [13]

This ode is very similar to traditional odes celebrating victory. However, it emphasizes not only the triumph but also the dangers faced during the battle and the political issues surrounding Cleopatra's potential threat to Rome. Horace masterfully depicted how Cleopatra's suicide enhanced Rome's status, how the enemy's fear was justified, and how Rome's people and military demonstrated their capabilities – all conveyed through this single ode.

In "Ode 3.2," Horace includes the famous line "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori," [11] meaning "It is sweet and honorable to die for one's country." This ode also carries political undertones, glorifying civic duty, patriotism, and the heroism of soldiers. In this way, Horace used his odes to strengthen patriotism and national values.

**The Renaissance:** By the Renaissance period, ancient Greek and Roman culture had begun to greatly influence European literature, leading to a new development in the style of odes. **Petrarch** (1304–1374), one of the most famous poets of this era, played a key role in promoting the culture of antiquity. Although Petrarch was not as skilled in writing odes as Horace, he made notable changes to the structure of odes and sought to revive ancient Greek and Latin manuscripts. His efforts enriched knowledge about ancient literature.

Through these efforts, Petrarch also significantly contributed to the development of the Italian literary language, earning him the title "Father of Humanism." His famous work *Canzoniere* (*The Songbook*), composed of 366 poems, mainly sonnets, closely mirrors the structure and themes of odes. Like odes, these poems focused on themes of life, love, and beauty. Petrarch's works inspired many Renaissance poets who also followed the traditions of Pindar and Horace.

**The Modern Era:** By the 19th century and beyond, odes had evolved into newer forms. They began to be written in quatrains without adhering to strict rules. Writers continued the traditional practices of Greek and Roman poetry, but also began to artistically address social issues in their odes. Themes like independence, national prosperity, and freedom became predominant.

The development of the ode genre in the 19th century is closely associated with poets like **John Keats** and **Percy Bysshe Shelley**. They expressed philosophical and aesthetic themes in their odes, gaining fame for their contributions to the genre.

### Results.

In the 20th century, we observe a tendency to replace traditional metrical structures with free verse in odes. A notable modern poet, British writer **W.H. Auden** (1907–1973), wrote odes on various subjects. His "Ode to the Medieval Poets" expresses admiration for medieval poets, praising them for writing great works despite challenging conditions. Auden's ode has a tone of reverence for deceased poets, and though it resembles an elegy, the praise and elevated spirit make it identifiable as an ode.



In his “*Ode to Terminus*,” Auden addresses Terminus, one of the Roman gods. The poet gives this a symbolic meaning, suggesting that even in the modern world, one cannot deny the presence of a higher power and that everything is ultimately governed by a supreme being. Auden expresses this idea artistically in the ode:

*In this world our colossal immodesty  
has plundered and poisoned it is possible  
You still might save us, who by now have  
learned this: that scientists, to be lucky,*

*must remind us to take all they say as a  
tall story, that abhorred in the Heavens are self-  
proclaimed poets who, to wow an audience, utter  
some resonant lie. [10]*

Oden authored six distinct odes, one of which, “*Ode V*,” has been widely recognized by literary critics. Published in 1932, this ode is part of *The Orators*, a complex collection of poems that has garnered high praise from many critics. Although critics have long acknowledged the significance of this work, they have also noted its difficulty in interpretation, which is largely due to Auden’s unconventional style.

*The Orators* is divided into three books: *The Initiates*, *Journal of an Airman*, and six odes. These odes are narrated by a schoolteacher who suffers from mental anguish and looks to his students for salvation. He believes the opportunities given to his contemporaries have passed, leaving him with hope only for future generations. The fifth ode, titled “*Which Side Am I Supposed to Be On?*”, deals with the theme of war and is deeply sorrowful. It is evident that Auden introduces a completely new subject matter into his odes. Critic **John R. Boly** describes Auden’s odes as “*poems that call the youth to caution and moderation.*”

In modern literature, the evolution of the ode genre owes much to poet and politician **Pablo Neruda** (1904–1973), a Nobel Prize laureate. Neruda was a master of the ode, using his poems to explore and artistically interpret everything around him – from fruits to clouds drifting in the sky, to his friends, and beloved places in Chile. At the age of 40, Neruda decided to write one ode every week and eventually composed 225 odes in total. These odes were edited by renowned translator and Latin American literature scholar **Ilan Stavans** and compiled in a book titled “*All the Odes.*” Translated into English by famous translators such as **Philip Levine**, **Paul Muldoon**, **Mark Strand**, and **Margaret Sayers Peden**, these odes are collectively read as the personal diary of a man searching for the meaning of life.

It is known that Pindar’s odes consisted of three parts, while Horace’s odes were divided into four. English odes were polished and simplified by modern poets such as **Keats**, **Dryden**, **Coleridge**, and **Shelley**. Neruda further developed this simplicity. His subjects often celebrated everyday objects – such as a chair, an onion, a pair of shoes, a train station, a dictionary, a rural theater, or the hands of his lover. In other words, Neruda promoted the importance of the seemingly insignificant.

### **Ode to the Dictionary (Oda al diccionario)**

Dictionary, let one  
of your thousand hands, one  
of your thousand emeralds,  
a single  
drop  
of your virginal springs,  
one grain  
of  
your magnanimous granaries  
fall  
at the right moment  
on my lips,  
the thread of my pen,  
into my inkwell.  
From the dense and sonorous  
depths of your jungle,  
give me,  
when I need it,  
a single birdsong, the luxury  
of a bee,  
the fallen fragment  
of your ancient wood perfumed  
by an eternity of jasmine,  
one  
syllable,  
one tremor, one sound,  
one seed:  
I am made of earth and with words I sing. [5, 33]

When we read a passage from Pablo Neruda's poem, we understand just how humble he was as both a poet and a person. In this poem, he conveys the profound meaning found even in something as simple as a dictionary that we use in our daily lives, teaching us that we should be grateful for every ordinary object. "In my work," he wrote in his memoir *Confieso que he vivido* (Memoirs), published in 1974, "I tried to prove that poetry can be written about any subject that would be useful to the whole of society" [7, 58].

### Conclusion.

The evolution of the ode in Western literature reflects not only shifts in poetic style and form but also significant changes in cultural and philosophical priorities across time. Originally designed to celebrate and praise in a ceremonial and formal tone, as in the Greek choral odes, the ode retained elements of praise but gained a reflective, personal quality, suited to the quieter philosophical and Epicurean themes valued by Roman poets shaping a more introspective approach. The Renaissance revived classical forms with a humanistic perspective, while Romantic poets like Keats and Shelley used odes to explore deep, existential themes. By the modern era, the ode had become a versatile form for expressing a wide range of topics, showcasing its adaptability across literary periods.



Thus, the ode has not only adapted in structural and stylistic terms but has also deepened its thematic range, accommodating each era's evolving human concerns – from public and celebratory themes to private, philosophical, and existential explorations.

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