

Biography

Content

Ancient biography is a highly stylized genre that portrays a prominent individual whose character is presented as a model of virtue or vice. There is little of the contemporary interest in psychological development, conversion, or even the individual as such, but rather a static conception of the human person that serves to illustrate cultural ideals. Thus, biographies frequently begin with an unusual birth which portends the significance of the individual. Life events are then narrated which serve as varying settings for displaying the reiterated virtues or vices for which the person is known.

Ancient biographies were arranged chronologically or topically. They frequently include other genres that help develop the portrait of the individual (forms such as apophthegms and *chreiai*, proverbs, speeches, dialogues). The biography is related to ancient forms of speech that celebrate or criticize the individual (encomium, invective, eulogy).

Form

- birth, genealogy
- public life
- death

Function

Since the celebrated person is portrayed as a static model of virtue or vice, s/he functions less as a real individual than as an ideal type. The function of biography is thus didactic or educative. Furthermore, the biography functioned to legitimate or criticize the individual's disciples and/or relatives.

For Further Practice

Gospels
Plutarch, *Lives*

Philo, *Life of Moses*
Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*

Josephus, *The Life*