

# The analysis of pericles' funeral oration essay sample



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### *Background of Pericles Funeral Oration*

Pericles' Funeral Oration stands as the grand exemplar of epideictic oratory, specifically the form of epideictic known to the Greeks as epitaphios logos, and to us as a eulogy. Delivered in 430 B. C. E., near the end of Pericles' life and following the first year of the Peloponnesian War the speech was mandated by the laws of the democracy. Pericles is speaking to the Athenian people who have assembled outside the walls of the city near a large funeral pyre where the bodies have been burned. The purpose of the speech is to honor those who have died in the war (Murphy et al., 2003 241). The Funeral Oration of Pericles is the epitome of what the Greeks termed epideictic, or ceremonial, oratory, a public display speech designed to inspire an audience.

As Peleus had urged Achilles—always be the best—Pericles similarly sought to inspire the Athenians to maintain their city's preeminence. However, the speech is no mere celebration of Athenian values. Insofar as it spurs the Athenians to future action, it also becomes deliberative or exhortatory rhetoric. The oration was delivered in the winter of 431—430 B. C., during the first year of the Peloponnesian War. According to Athenian custom, a public funeral was held annually to honor those who had died defending the city. As Thucydides relates, three days prior to the ceremony, the remains of soldiers slain during the first year of fighting were placed in a tent, where their families and friends could mourn and make private offerings. This was followed by a funeral procession in which the dead were placed in expensive state (Colaiaco 2001 76).

### *History of Oration*

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The Funeral Oration is not preserved exactly as it was written or delivered. The historian Thucydides captured the essence of Pericles' remarks in his notes and transcribed them in his chronicle *The Peloponnesian War* (Murphy et al., 2003 241). In his essay *On Thucydide*, Dionysius of Halicarnassus questions Thucydides' decision to make Pericles' Funeral Oration the conclusion of his narrative of the first year of the Peloponnesian war. He observes that the Athenians who fell in this year were quite few in number, and that these few had done nothing memorable (King 1998 114). Pericles saw this occasion as an opportunity to advance themes broader than commemorations, although certainly lament, consolation, and commemoration of the dead are central to the speech. Pericles understood that he must fulfill his responsibility to honor the fallen soldiers, but then to justify their sacrifice by praising the society for which they died. With so many sons, brothers, fathers, and loved ones having perished, and after only one year of what Pericles knew would be a long struggle for Athens against the Spartan alliance, he knew that he would have to raise the spirits of the people and persuade them to continue the struggle by reviewing for them what they have and what they might lose. The Funeral Oration, then, is an oration as much about the living as about the dead (Murphy et al., 2003 241).

### *Themes of Oration*

The work of Pericles institute the theme of balance as depicted by the idealism perspective present in Athenian political and societal managements. However, the image of a beautiful balance between the individual and the city fails to recognize party conflicts that existed from the <https://assignbuster.com/the-analysis-of-pericles-funeral-oration-essay-sample/>

seventh century B. C as presented by the funeral oration. Pericles ordained and illustrated the need to pose balance between the state and its members in order to obtain greatness (Lebow 2003 121). The theme of balance is supported by another overarching theme of the Funeral Oration, besides that of Athens' *dunamis*, is the aristocratic, not tyrannical, nature of Athenian democracy, which somehow institute the concept of state-citizen balanced relationships.

By the end of the oration, Pericles has brilliantly reshaped and remolded all Athenians so that they are all potentially *aristoi*, within a democracy that is in a sense really an *aristrokratia*. In this schema, to evoke the lavishness of the demos' *megaloprepeia* would not only be inappropriate but also unwanted, because its excessiveness carries it beyond an aristocratic to a tyrant-scale level (Morgan 2003 137). Lastly, theme of Pericles' Funeral Oration is the greatness of Athens, which is the final destination of balanced society in a form of democratic union. Praise of the city was a standard feature of the genre, which was possibly a distinctly Athenian invention, but as several modern studies have shown Pericles' speech gives disproportional weight to the city's praise' Thucydides' version is the earliest extant of all Funeral Orations, making it difficult to judge from the later ones — which were influenced by Thucydides and had different historical and literary Contexts - which parts of Pericles' speech are traditional (Price 2001 179).

#### Works Cited

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