

Introduction to Literary Theory
Prof. Sayan Chattopadhyay
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur

Lecture – 02
Literature and Mimesis: Plato (I)

Hello and welcome back to another lecture in the series titled Introduction to Literary Theory. In today's lecture we are going to look back at the legacy of the Greek classical philosophy. And we are going to see how the impacting classical philosophy was felt among the later generation of literary theorists. The Greek philosopher with whom we will start this exploration of ancient Greece and its philosophical legacy is Plato. And the influence of Plato in the European tradition of thoughts and ideas has been so enormous that the 20th century intellectual A. N. Whitehead; had famously declared that the whole of the European philosophical tradition was little more than a series of footnotes added to the writings of Plato.

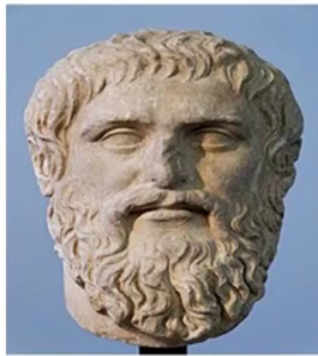
It is therefore, only fitting that we start our discussion of literary theory by looking back at the writings of Plato; however, interestingly enough Plato is usually remembered in the discussions of literary studies for the way in which he famously or some might even say in famously banished the poets and exiled them from his conception of an ideal republic.

Why is there Plato still important for a discussion of literary studies also why would someone who is known for his wisdom seek to banish poets from an ideal city? Has not literature been an expression of human culture and civilizational attainment throughout its existence and has not Greece itself ancient Greece being one of the most brilliant sites of literary productions; starting from Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, (Refer Time: 02:37) Escalise, Socrates and Euripides. We will come to these questions soon enough, and we will see what relevance Plato might have on an effort to theorize literature in the modern context.

But to start with let us briefly acquaint ourselves with the figure of Plato.

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Plato
(c. 427 BCE – c. 347 BCE)



Roman copy of a portrait bust
by Silanion for the Academia
in Athens (c. 370 BC)

Plato was born somewhere in the second half of the 5th century BCE. One of the probable years of his birth is 427 BCE, but I say probable, because there is no absolute consensus on this date. Today we think Plato as an eminent Greek philosopher, but back in the 5th century BCE, we would not have come across any notion of Greece as a single national cum political entity.

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Source: National Geographic

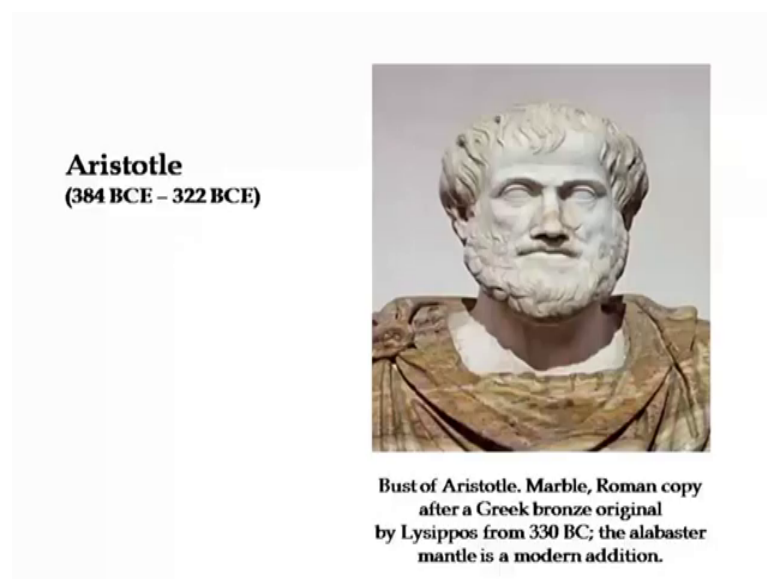
Rather Greece at that point of time represented a culture sphere. And it represented a culture sphere which spread across not only what we know today as the modern day

Greece, but also it spread across southern Italy, some parts of northern Africa, and also some regions of modern day turkey.

This vast culture sphere was dotted by independent city states. And it was with reference to these city states that the Greeks of the 5th century BCE primarily defined their identity. And the city state with which Plato was associated with was Athens. And it was here that he had his training under one of the most remarkable intellectuals of all time Socrates.

After the execution of Socrates in about 399 BCE Plato left a Athens, and he went to southern Italy. But later on in his life he came back to his native city state. And he established there his famous school known as Academy. And it is here in Academy that he trained one of the most notable philosophers of the European tradition, whose name is Aristotle.

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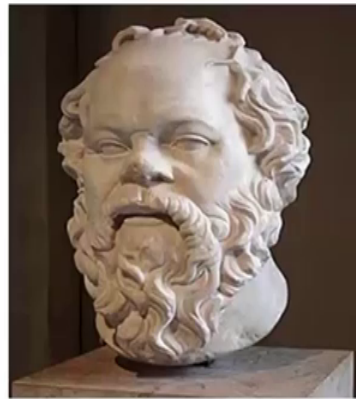


And Plato died here again we do not have an exact date, but Plato died somewhere around the middle of the 4th century BCE. The years through which Plato lived were remarkably (Refer Time: 05:45). The first 30 years of Plato's life was spent under the shadow of the second Peloponnesian war between Athens and Sparta. And this war saw a thorough destruction of the Athenian form of government which had sustained its golden era in the 5th century BCE.

Plato's career therefore, in a way marks both the high point of the achievements of the classical Athenian civilization. And also it bears witness to the beginning of the end of that civilization. And ironically some of Plato's own relatives were responsible in siding with the rival power of Sparta, and bringing down the earlier form of Athenian government that ultimately led to the downfall of the Athenian civilization as a whole.

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Socrates
(c. 470 BCE – 399 BCE)



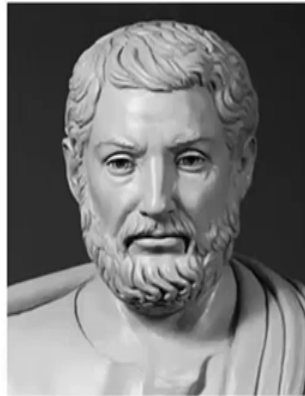
A bust of Socrates in the Louvre.

But even more significant in this regard is Plato's association direct association with Socrates, that mercurial figure who was greatly responsible for questioning and for undermining some of the very foundational beliefs that held the Athenian way of life together. In fact, Socrates was executed in around 399 BCE, by the Athenian state for not recognizing the god of the city and this was a charge brought against Socrates, he did not recognize the god of the city and he was said to corrupt the minds of the young men of Athens, through his novel ideas, through his system of questioning some of the foundational beliefs.

But what was this Athenian world order this old Athenian world order that Plato saw crumbling during his own lifetime? This world order can perhaps be summed up by using a single word. And that single word is democracy. The road to democracy for Athens began early in the 6th century when a Greek statesman named Solon reform the existing model of Athenian governance. Under Solon governmental power which was previously held by a group of 9 Athenians of noble birth passed on to a council of 400

Athenian citizens who now formed the government of the city state. About a 100 years later, this inclusive expansion of the political structure was furthered even more significantly by a man named Cleisthenes.

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Modern bust of
Cleisthenes, known as
"the father of Athenian
democracy", on view at
the Ohio
Statehouse, Columbus,
Ohio.

Now, Cleisthenes also like Solon was a statesman. And he was the one who finally, severed the connection between political power and the welding nobles of Athens. Because Cleisthenes gave every free male citizen of Athens the power to vote and it was through this voting process, that the government of the city now came to be elected. Thus in 507 BCE, the democratic form of government was born in Athens. Though most of us are now accustomed to living under democratic regimes all over the world. In 507 BCE democracy was a revolutionary idea, where small tradesmen wealthy citizens, aristocrats all of them became equal partners in the Athenian government. But we have to remember that this sense of equality.

And political agency was shared only by the free male citizens and though this of course, represented a major increase from the days before so long when only 9 aristocrats ruled Athens. It was still only about 20 percent of the total people living in Athens who had the right to vote. So, free male citizens of Athens actually consisted not more than 20 percent of it is entire population. Women, slaves and foreigners were still excluded from the political scene in democratic Athens. And they did not have the right to vote.

And we will see during the course of our lectures, how this exclusion of women, how this exclusion of slaves of foreigners played an important role in Plato's theorizing about literature in his book *The Republic*.

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The Republic
- by Plato.
(published c. 380 BCE)

Title page of the oldest manuscript: Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Gr. 1807 (19th century)

Incidentally *The Republic* which is the book that we will be focusing on is in fact, the text where we find the idea of banishing the poets from the ideal city state to which I had referred to earlier. And therefore, it is on this book that we would pivot our discussion on Plato and his theorization of literature during the course of today's lecture. Having said this, I would also like to point out that *The Republic* is not primarily a treatise on literature. Rather its main focus is on the idea of governance. Its focus is on what are the best ways to run to govern a state.

And as I have already mentioned the Athenian democracy which had sustained the classical golden age of Athens during the 5th century BCE was already being questioned during Plato's lifetime. Not only by external threats posed by such neighbouring city states like Sparta, but also internally by individuals like Socrates. And situated in this twilight of Athenian democracy, Plato in his treatise *The Republic*, try to look into the possible forms of governance that might prove best for the running of an ideal city state. Now the very fact that literature is conceived as part of this broader social political framework and not as an isolated practice is something to be noted.

Because if we understand this, then we will not be taken aback when we see contemporary theorists trying to read literature by placing it within a broader interdisciplinary context, because this is precisely what has been happening with all theorization of literature since at least 360 BCE when Plato wrote the public. But before we started discussing about Plato's theorization of literature, with respect to *The Republic*, it may point out one very important aspect about the writings that have come down to us bearing the name of Plato. These writings are mostly in the form of dialogues. With perhaps only a major exception being the work titled *Apology*. In these Platonic dialogues, we usually see the figure of Socrates occupying the centre stage.

And we see various other people engaging in disputation, engaging in conversation with the philosopher Socrates. It is this conversational style that Socrates uses to expound his theories, and also to demolish received ideas presented by his interlocutors; this means, firstly, that Plato's dialogues themselves reflect the kind of literature for which classical Athens was most famous for, which is the literary form of drama. Secondly, this means that in Plato's dialogues like *The Republic* for instance, we do not directly hear the voice of Plato himself. What we hear primarily is the voice of Socrates.

But this opens a number of questions of course, because is Socrates his voice that we hear in a text like *The Republic*, is it representative in a transparent way the voice of Plato, or is Socrates's voice a reflection of what the historical Socrates had to say on the matters around which these dialogues are constructed, or a Socrates's figure like a character in a play whose words though they are written by the playwright does not necessarily reflect the playwright's opinions. Or even the exact sayings of the historical figure on whom the dramatic character might be modelled. As we shall see these questions will have a direct relevance to what *The Republic* has to say about literature. And therefore, it is to this text *The Republic* that we now turn.

The main problem that Socrates of *The Republic* appears to have with poetry, is that it is imitative in nature that is how Socrates defines poetry in *The Republic*. By the way here I should point out that in this context poetry stands for the wider field of literature that was known to Plato. And therefore, it has a sense that is slightly different from what we understand by poetry. Today anyway coming back to Socrates the problem that he identifies at the heart of poetry is its imitative nature.

And the Greek word that refers to imitation is mimesis; this will be a key word for the few lectures following this one. In book 10 of *The Republic* which is the last chapter of this dialogue, Socrates mentions that the kind of poetry that he thinks should be banned from the ideal city state, is characterized by imitation or mimesis of and I quote; the actions of men whether voluntary or involuntary on which a good or bad result has ensued, and they rejoice or sorrow accordingly.

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Socrates mentions that the kind of poetry that should be banned from the ideal city-state is characterized by imitation or mimesis of :

“the actions of men, whether voluntary or involuntary, on which, [...], a good or bad result has ensued, and they rejoice or sorrow accordingly”.

(Book X, *The Republic*)

In other words, Socrates has a problem with poetry that imitates men and their actions, and show how these actions produce good or bad results, thereby creating joy or sorrow for an individual. In the same chapter Socrates also states, the reason why he has a problem with such kind of imitative poetry, and according to Socrates hearing in I quote.

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According to Socrates,

“the imitative poet implants an evil constitution, for he indulges the irrational nature which has no discernment of greater and less, but thinks the same thing at one time great and at another small- he is a manufacturer of images and is very far removed from the truth”.

(Book X, *The Republic*)

The imitative poet implants an evil constitution, for he indulges the irrational nature which has no discernment of greater and less, but things the same thing at one time great and at another small. He is a manufacturer of images and is very far removed from the truth. If we bring down this statement, we will see that for Socrates imitative poetry is problematic because of 2 reasons. Firstly, he argues that imitative poetry has a corrupting effect upon its audience. It quote unquote implants an evil constitution. And secondly, Socrates argues that imitative poetry manufactures images that are far removed from the truth. Both of these so called problems that Socrates mentions incorporate some rather complicated reasoning and would need a significant amount of unpacking.

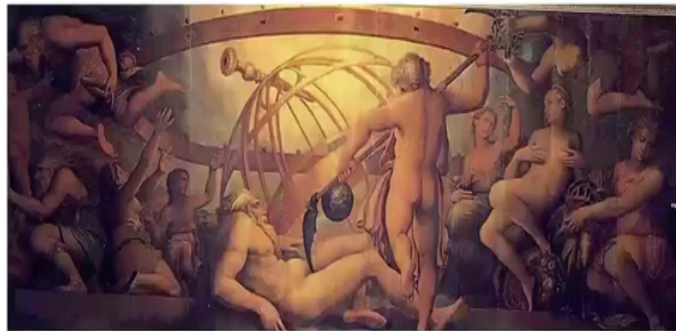
But let us start with the first problem. Imitative poetry is corrupting and plants an evil constitution among its audience. Let us see how this unpacks. In some earlier chapters of *The Republic* namely book 2 and book 3, we find a rather straightforward explanation in fact, of this moral objection that Socrates levies against imitative poetry. In these books Socrates argues that stories told by the poets have as profound an influence on the mind of young children as gymnastic exercises have on shaping their bodies. Therefore, given the significant ways in which stories can fashion the impressionable mind of young children, they should not be exposed to certain kinds of imitative poetry.

And what are these kinds of poetry? Well, the kind of poetry that Socrates has in mind here is a one which depicts bad characters or which depicts morally degenerate actions.

Socrates argues that if impressionable young children are exposed to such imitative poetry, the unsavoury characters and their actions depicted in them might have a corrupting influence on their minds; thereby making them incapable of developing into good and upright citizens of the ideal city state.

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The Mutilation of Uranus by Saturn (Cronus): Painting by Giorgio Vasari



Source: <http://www.uwm.edu/Course/mythology/0200/titans.htm>

By way of an example Socrates refers to the story of the Greek God Uranus and the strife that he had with his son Cronus. And this story is depicted famously by Hesiod. According to Socrates such stories of quarrels between a father and a son who are also on top of that divine figures; said a very bad example to the children who are to become the future guardians of the ideal city state. This is because and I quote Socrates's own words.

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“the young man should not be told that in committing the worst of crimes he is far from doing anything outrageous; and that even if he chastises his father when does wrong, in whatever manner, he will only be following the example of the first and greatest among the gods”.

(Book X, The Republic)

The young man should not be told that in committing the worst of crimes he is far from doing anything outrageous; and that even if it just chastides his father when does wrong in whatever manner, he will only follow the example of the first and the greatest among the gods. In the light of this argument the moral objection that Socrates voices in book 10 can be elaborated in a very simple manner. Some imitative poetry should be shunned because by portraying immoral men and their dubious actions they set bad examples in front of the impressionable children and young men.

These are the examples of imitative poetry these are the kinds of imitative poetry which corrupts the souls and implants an evil constitution among the audience; however, this explanation that Socrates only wanted to ban one particular kind of imitative poetry cannot be sustained till the end of the dialogue. Because by the time we reach book 10 we find that Socrates is condemning in imitative poetry in general.

So, in book 10 he does not make a distinction between imitative poetry representing bad characters and immoral actions and imitative poetry representing good characters and their noble actions. In light of this fact, the source of Socrates is objection therefore, needs to be located not in the morally good or morally bad content of the poetry. Rather it needs to be located in imitative poetry's essence as a product of mimesis. Socrates seems to think that imitation itself is ethically corrupting. Irrespective of whether what is being imitated is morally good or bad.

But this leads to the question why is mimesis; including mimesis of good men and their noble actions, morally corrupting, what is it in the very idea of imitation that is problematic. And it is to this question that we now turn. According to the character of Socrates in Plato's *The Republic* and I will keep repeating this because I am not talking about the historical Socrates I am talking about the Socrates as we find him in this particular dialogue, mimesis is corrupting because of 2 distinct, but interconnected reasons. The first reason has to do with the nature of reality or nature of truth.

And this is associated with a philosophical theory that is usually referred to as Plato's theory of forms. To understand this theory of form, let us look at the example of a bed that Plato mentions in book 10 of *The Republic*. Now what do we understand when we try to think of a real bed or a true bed?

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According to Plato's theory of form, the true and original bed is "one existing in nature; which is made by God".

(Book X, The Republic)

According to Plato's theory of forms, the true and original bed is and I quote; one, existing in nature which is made by god. Now this might sound slightly counterintuitive given the fact that when we think about a bed we usually think of an object that is made by a carpenter; however, according to the theory of forms what the carpenter makes is in fact, a copy of the original form of the bed that already exists in nature.

And this original bed is unconnected which specific instances of a beds that we might come across in material reality. To understand the logic of this argument here, let us

assume that by using some high-tech weapon, we managed to destroy all the specific instances of beds that exist in material reality.

According to the Platonic theory of forms, even with all the material beds gone, we will still retain the idea of the bed; because the idea is universal, and that idea is not dependent on the existence of specific individual beds. So, in this theory the original and the true bed is the ideal form; that is universal and non-material. The material bed is only an imitation of this non-material ideal form. But what happens in case of mimeses or mimetic art which imitates from the world of material reality? Well in those cases we move even further from the true and original form.

Thus for instance the painting of a bed is an imitation of a material bed that is manufactured by a carpenter which in itself is an imitation of the original and universal idea of the bed. Socrates in Plato's The Republic builds his critique of missus in general and mimetic poetry in particular on this sense of distance from the original and true form of a thing. And according to this theory of forms, this theory which shows us the distance between an imitation and the original mimetic art is problematic because the painting of a bed for instance is situated at a third remove from the true and original bed.

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1st state	2nd remove	3rd remove
Ideal form of the bed	Material bed	Painting of bed

If you look at this slide, you will clearly see this 3 step relationship, where the first state is a ideal form of the bed, the second remove from that is the material bed made by the

carpenter, and the third removed from that is a painting of the bed mimetic expression mimetic representation of the material bed.

Now, there is a problem here; which is, that even if we assume that the process of mimesis as depicted by the act of painting a bed is situated at a third remove from the truth from the reality of the ideal form, why should it be considered as something which has the power of corrupting, something which is deceiving, something which is morally not right? When the argument is that since material bed is a specific representation of the ideal form. It only represents an aspect of the universal, that is to say a very small part of the whole. When the painter in turn imitates the material bed, he imitates not the material bed as it is in reality, but rather as it appears to him.

So, for instance the painter standing next to a material bed will only paint the bed as it appears to him from that angle. This appearance does not encompass the entire reality of the material bed. This is because as soon as the painter changes his position, and here of course, we are talking about realistic painting, the form of painting that would be known to Plato. As soon as the painter changes his position a new angle is achieved and a whole new appearance of the bed is revealed to him.

And this new appearance is separate and distinct from the earlier appearance. Therefore, a painting of the material bed is again a small part of what the material bed is in reality. So, as you can see with each shift in the chain that takes us from the ideal form to the material expression to the artistic imitation of that material expression, we moved more and more away from the original essence of a thing. And this in itself is problematic, but this sense of becoming further and further removed from the truth as we pass through different levels of mimesis, is even further augmented if we consider that the faculty of human perception; is not obviously prone to (Refer Time: 31:50). Let us again consider an example.

Let us say that there are 2 objects which are of absolutely same dimensions and they are situated at 2 different points; one nearer to me and one farther to me. When I look at both of them, the one nearer to me will appear to be larger, and the one farther to me would appear to be smaller. Now if I were to try and paint them I will paint according to this perception and represent one body as small and the other body as large.

But in reality the dimensions of these 2 bodies are absolutely the same. So, my artistic imitation will be based on a faulty appearance and not on the true reality. Similarly, if I look at a stick immersed in water, I might paint it as crooked, because that is how it will appear to me. But in reality the stick might be straight and might only appear crooked in water because of refraction. Here again my imitation of the material object would be faulty since it will necessarily be based on appearances rather than on the truth rather than on the reality. Thus since mimesis is susceptible to deception, because it is based on appearances rather than on truth and reality, imitative art is realized as problematic.

But as you have noticed in my discussion so far, I have explained the objection to my message the objection to imitation only with reference to visual arts. So now, the question is how does this all connect to the topic of literature, and more specifically to the suggestion of banning the poets imitative poets from the ideal city. State we will address this issue in our next lecture.