

Introduction to Literary Theory
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Lecture – 03
Literature and Mimesis: Plato (II)

Hello and welcome back to this lecture series Introduction to Literary Theory. As you know we have been discussing Socrates's famous suggestion to ban poets from the ideal state as mentioned in Plato's the republic. And we have established that this objection to poets stem from the association with mimesis or imitation. And we have been trying to understand this objection of Socrates through the arguments that he presents with reference to imitative painting to the form of visual mimeses. In this lecture we will see how all of this connects to a Socrates's criticism of poetry and of poets.

However, before we can get to that discussion, where we move on to Socrates arguments about poetry and poets in particular, we will have to stay with our discussion on mimesis and the art of painting a little longer. And we need to clarify certain other things before we can enter the domain of literature proper. So, as I mentioned in my previous lecture Socrates in the republic considers mimesis to be corrupting for 2 distinct but interconnected reasons.

The first reason as I have already explained is that mimesis deals in appearances rather than in reality and is situated at a third remove from the true form of a thing. The second reason for which Socrates considers mimesis to be corrupting is because he thinks that it confuses our sense of distinction between knowledge and ignorance. Since, this is a somewhat complex argument that Socrates makes we will try and unravel it slowly.

And to begin with let us consider these lines that Socrates utters in book 10 of the republic.

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A painter will paint a cobbler, carpenter, or any other artist, though he knows nothing of their arts; and, if he is a good artist, he may deceive children or simple persons, when he shows them his picture of a carpenter from a distance, and they will fancy that they are looking at a real carpenter.

(Book X, *The Republic*)

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Now, the wording of this passage is slightly deceptive, and indeed a cursory reading of these lines might suggest that here Socrates is talking about something that is similar to the kind of experience that, we might have when we go to watch a 3D movie in a cinema hall. The 3D projection in the movie theatre can fool us or at the very least children and simple minded persons, into believing that they are looking at real human beings rather than at simulations or images. Similarly, we might think that what Socrates is saying is that a crafty painter can fool children and simple persons into believing that the carpenter on his canvas is a real 3 dimensional person rather than a painted image.

However, if we read the passage in the broader context of a book 10 of the republic, we will realize that this is not a really the kind of deception that, Socrates has in mind here. In fact, what Socrates is referring to here is the painters ability to make us believe that he is so knowledgeable in the art of carpentry that the man he has painted as a carpenter. He is precisely what an ideal carpenter looks like in real life. Similarly, he can also make us believe that he knows the art of gobbling shoes so well that his portrayal on the canvas is a true representation of how a cobbler looks and behaves like in real life.

In other words, a painter who represents through his paintings different kinds of men engaged in different kinds of profession might fool people into believing that his portraits are realistic, because he personally knows all about these professions and these crafts that he is portraying on the canvas. Therefore, the painter poses to the people as an all knowing person.

But of course, this is problematic and is in fact, a deception in itself as Socrates points out and I am quoting Socrates here.

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[...] whenever someone tells us that he has met a person who knows all the crafts as well as the other things that anyone else knows and that his knowledge of any subject is more exact than any of theirs is, we must assume that we're talking to a simple-minded fellow who has apparently encountered some sort of magician or imitator and been deceived into thinking him omniscient and that the reason he has been deceived is that he himself can't distinguish between knowledge, ignorance, and imitation.

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And been deceived into thinking him omniscient and that the reason he has been deceived is that he himself cannot distinguish between knowledge, ignorance and imitation. Simply put, a painter who is merely an imitator can pass himself off as knowledgeable in various crafts; only by confounding and deceiving a person who is himself ignorant it. And let us explore this thesis further with the help of an illustration. Socrates asks if we are to consider a flute, then who is the most knowledgeable person in that matter. Of course, the answer is the person who please flutes will be the most

knowledgeable, because he is the one who has genuine knowledge about whether a flute is good or bad.

Similarly, if we take another instrument crooked bad for instance, we will agree that the most knowledgeable person about a cricket bat is someone like Sachin Tendulkar for instance. So, just like a flutist, we will know about a flute because he is a master in the craft of using flutes, a cricketer like Sachin Tendulkar will be in the best position to discern whether a cricket bat is good or bad because he is a master in the craft of yielding it. If we extrapolate from these individual examples, we arrive at a general truth.

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Thus the general truth is the user or practitioner of something is the person who is really knowledgeable about that thing. In Socrates' words:

[...] the beauty and correctness of each manufactured item, living creature, and action [is] related to nothing but the use for which each is made or naturally adapted".

And that truth is the user or practitioner of something is a person who is really knowledgeable about that thing. In the words of Socrates, the beauty and correctness of each manufactured item living creature and action is related to nothing but the use for which each is made or naturally adapted.

So, the person who makes the flute or the cricket bat or any other such instrument of craft is therefore, not as knowledgeable as the user of that instrument or the practitioner of the craft. That is a meeker of a cricket bats we will necessarily be guided by a master cricketer, because it is the latter who has the true knowledge about what makes a bat good or bad, or in the case of flutes for instance and here I will quote Socrates the flute player we will tell the flute maker which of his flutes is satisfactory to the performer.

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Or in case of the flute, to use Socrates' words:

“the flute-player will tell the flute-maker which of his flutes is satisfactory to the performer; he will tell him how he ought to make them, and the other will attend to his instructions”

He will tell him how he ought to make them, and the other we will attend to his instructions.

Therefore, as we pass from the user to the maker, we already shift from real knowledge to a lesser form of knowledge. But the maker beat of flutes or of cricket bats or any other such thing is still aware of the true value of the items that he manufactures, because he is guided by the user; however, when we come to a painter who imitates on his canvas the material flute produced by a flute maker, this connection which true knowledge is absolutely lost it is completely severed. Or rather knowledge about the value of the flute actually becomes irrelevant to the painter, and why is that the case?

Well, imagine if you were to paint a flute by copying a material sample. Would you need to be able to play the flute? Or would you need to be able to judge the sound of the flute before you start painting? No of course, because how good the flute sounds and how worthy, it is of performance is irrelevant to the process of imitating the flute on the canvas. So, in other words a painted flute might appear to be good without really being good. Here again we come to the distinction between appearance and reality that we had encountered earlier in our discussion. And we come to the same conclusion that mimesis or imitation is problematic because it deals in appearances rather than in reality.

But there is another level of deception going on here. The painter who imitates the flutes need not know anything about flute playing to create realistic images of flutes; however,

the very realism of his painting might trick children and simple minded people to assume that the painter knows all about flutes, because his painting of the flute is so nice. So, the imitator appears to be knowledgeable even though in reality he may be ignorant.

So, from this discussion of mimesis in the context of realistic paintings we arrive at 2 main arguments. The first argument is that mimesis deals in appearances that are situated at a third remove from the reality. The second argument is that mimetic artists lack true knowledge of the things that they imitate though they might fool one into believing that, they are greatly knowledgeable. Now let us take these insights on mimesis, and see how they apply to the work of the poets who imitate the actions of men.

It is very easy to explain the opposition to poets and poetry that imitate morally reprobate characters and their degenerate actions. What is difficult to explain is how this opposition might equally apply to poets imitating noblemen and virtues actions. Let us start here with an example in book four of the republic Socrates points out that a virtue like the virtue of justice for instance does not have anything to do with the outward nature of a man.

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Socrates points out that **the virtue of justice** for instance does not have anything to do with the outward nature of a man **but has to do with the harmonious condition of his inner life, "which is the true self and concernment of man"**.

(Book IV, *The Republic*)

Rather it has to do with the harmonious condition of his inner life which and I quote, is the true self and concernment of man. But a poet who wants to represent the virtues of a just man can only imitate the outward appearance of such a man. And not his inner self which is after all the true source of his virtue. Therefore, we are here again confronted

with the argument of mimesis being imitation of appearances, which are situated at a third remove from reality.

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1st state	2nd remove	3rd remove
Ideal form of the bed	Material bed	Painting of bed
Inner self	Outward actions	Poetic imitation of outward actions

And this slide would help explain the overlapping arguments. The relation established in the first row are already familiar to us. The true reality of a bed is it is universal non material form. The material expression of that form is situated at a second remove from the origin. The painting of the material bed is an imitation of an appearance which intern is situated at a third remove from the reality of the universal form.

Following the same logic, we can read the second row thus, the true seat of a virtue like justice for instance is a soul or the inner self of a man, his outwards action are particular manifestations of that original virtue and are at a second remove from the soul. The poetic mimesis of virtuous men is only an imitation of this outward appearance of virtue.

And is therefore, situated at a third remove from what originally constitutes virtue. But this however, does not explain why poetry that imitates virtuous men can be morally corrupting. To arrive at an answer to this question, let us try and understand how the binary of knowledge and ignorance plays out in mimetic poetry. As already mentioned the painter in spite of being ignorant about flute playing or about carpentry can appear to his audience to be knowledgeable in these crafts, because his paintings of a flute or his paintings of a carpenter look nice, and they look pleasing.

Similarly, a poet like the poet Homer for instance, in spite of being ignorant about virtue can appear to know all about it because it is his poetic representation of virtuous men might be appealing. Now according to these this argument there are 2 ways in which a poet like Homer deceives and corrupts his audience through poetic representation of virtue. The first way is by pouring things which are not virtuous as expressions of virtue.

And the second is of course, by pretending to be knowledgeable while really being ignorant. Let us take the first of the 2 points, how or why does a poet portray things which are not virtuous as expressions of virtue. As I have mentioned before, virtue according to Socrates of the Platonic dialogue is a matter of the inner self it is a matter related to the soul rather than the outward man.

And one of the key features of virtue is a harmoniously organized inner self. The most identifiable sign of a man possessed with the harmonious inner self is his quiet and controlled nature. So, in book 10 Socrates says that a virtuous man with a rational and a quiet character will always remain pretty much the same under any given circumstances he will remain unmoved.

Indeed, this very calmness this very unchanged ability of a character under varied circumstances is what marks him as virtuous in Socrates' scheme of things. However, as Socrates also points out in book 10 of the Republic that such a virtuous character is difficult to portray through imitative poetry. And this is because a poet depends on imitating the outward actions and emotional expressions of a man to portray his characters.

So, they cannot portray a virtuous character if there is no great outward manifestation of that virtuousness. What the poets therefore, end up representing as virtuous characters are characters who act in an exaggerated manner and try and express the inner nobility of their character through those exaggerated actions. Yet according to Socrates' worldview this exaggerated outward manifestation of the inner life represents not a virtuous soul at all, but rather it is opposite, it represents a soul, which has not achieved the inner harmony that is essential for virtue.

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So all the men of apparently noble characters who are represented through their **virtuous actions in poetry**, are, according to **Socrates**, not virtuous men at all. They only *appear to be virtuous*, and, as we already know, **appearances are deceptive and removed from reality.**

So, all the men of apparently noble character who are represented through their virtuous actions in poetry are according to Socrates not virtuous men at all. They only appear to be virtuous, and as we already know appearances are deceptive removed from reality.

So, just as a flute which may look good in painting, but might not be good in reality a character who appears to be virtuous in poetry might not be virtuous at all. This is one of the ways in which an imitative poet deceives his audience even while apparently portraying virtuous men and their noble actions. The second way that the imitative poets deceive and ultimately corrupt their audience is by posing to be knowledgeable about virtues. It was a common practice in the Greek world to which Plato belong to make a young children read poetry of poets like homer or (Refer Time: 21:01),

So, that they are able to learn the nuances of a virtuous character, and they learn how to be virtuous themselves. And today's context this will mean something like exposing the children to good movies or good novels so that they can grow up to become like the virtuous characters portrayed in these movies and fictions. But Socrates identifies a problem here.

Just because a poet like homer portrays virtuous characters, we assume that he will know a great deal about how to be virtuous. Yet, this might not be the case at all. Because following Socrates's arguments we have already established that a painter who imitates a

flute on canvas might make the image of a good flute without knowing anything, about flute playing or about the distinction between good and bad flutes.

Similarly, Homer might not know anything about how to be virtuous in spite of his ability to portray characters who appear to be virtuous, since we will not go to a painter we do not go to a painter of flutes to learn the art of flute playing, we should also not therefore, go to poets who represent virtuous characters to learn the art of being virtuous. Yet, we often confuse mimetic portrayal of virtue with true knowledge about virtue and therefore, we start regarding the poets like Homer for instance as our teachers. This confusion Socrates suggests can have serious consequences for the impressionable minds of young men.

And this is why he wants to ban the poets from his ideal city state. Apart from these reasons that have already stated, Socrates in the book 10 of the Republic also raises another objection against mimetic poetry. For Socrates to develop into a virtuous individual one should be guided by reason, and keep in control that irrational part of one's nature, which gets easily excitable under the influence of images and appearances. Thus according to Socrates when confronted by calamities or rational individual would try to keep calm rather than get swayed by it.

He would use his reason this rational individual would use his reason to keep in check the desire for weeping and wailing and showing exaggerated manifestation of his grief. Yet, as I have already mentioned it is precisely this exaggerated outward action that forms the basis of imitative poetry. So, poetry rather than enhancing the faculty of reason according to Socrates appeals to the baser passionate nature of an individual.

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**[P]oetry feeds and waters the passions
instead of drying them up; [poetry] lets
them rule, although they ought to be
controlled, if mankind are ever to
increase in happiness and virtue.**

(‘Socrates’, The Republic)

In his own words poetry feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up poetry let us them rule although they ought to be controlled if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue.

Thus gradually under the influence of poetry individuals feel to become or remain upright rational men, and turn into baser human beings like children or fools or women who are slaves to their uncontrolled passions. And here I must note that this association between mimesis, and women children and insane people can indeed be very strongly traced throughout the republic, but this bias should not surprise us. Given the fact that in the Athenian democracy which form the political context for Plato’s writing. It was only the free male citizens who were considered to be equals and who were considered to be people who were worthy of voting.

Everyone else including women and children were considered inferior human specimens. Thus, it is not incomprehensible as to why the effects of mimesis would be characterized by associating it with the nature of women children or individuals with limited intelligence. At the end of this discussion, I would like to note that even while criticizing mimetic art, Plato’s the republic resembles the form of a drama which was the mimetic art per excellence in ancient Athens.

Can we therefore, critique the content of Plato’s the republic by referring to it is form? I will leave this question open for you to answer.

But I should tell you that a strong criticism of Plato's portrayal of mimesis as evil and as corrupting was indeed launched soon after his death. And it was launched by none other than his own celebrated disciple Aristotle. It is to Aristotle's views on my mimesis that we will turn to in our next lecture, goodbye.