



Department of English
School of English and Foreign Languages
BHARATHIDASAN UNIVERSITY
Tiruchirappalli – 620 024, Tamil Nadu, India

Programme: M.A English

Course Title: Literary Criticism

Core Course: I

Unit I

Module 2

Dr. M. Angkayarkan Vinayakaselvi
Associate Professor
Department of English
Bharathidasan University
Email: avs@bdu.ac.in

Plato

Theory of Imitation

Plato's Theory of Imitation

- Imitation (Mimesis)
- Plato believed that Ideas or heavenly archetypes alone are true and real. All earthly things are mere copies of them. In other words, beauty, goodness, justice etc. are mere copies of the ideal beauty, goodness, etc. which exist in a heavenly realm.

- For example, a chair exists firstly as idea, secondly as object of craftsmanship, and thirdly as object of representation in art.
- Thus, mimesis is thrice removed from reality in the Platonic conception of the world. Just as the painter only imitates what he sees and does not know how to make or to use what he sees (he could paint a bed, but not make one), so the poet imitates reality without necessarily understanding it.

- Cave Image
- Here the physical world is in the form of a cave, in which the humans are trapped from the beginning of life, where we are stationary and cannot move our heads, so we perceive only shadows and sounds.
- Without reason, one of us is released and is encouraged to travel upward to the entrance of the cave.
- Then he is pulled to the entrance of the cave, where the light is hurting his eyes that are accustomed to the dark.

- The world of daylight represents the realm of Ideas. His eyes grow accustomed to the light and he can look up to the sun, and understand what the ultimate source of light and life is.
- This gradual process is a metaphor of education, and enlightenment. The enlightened person now has a moral responsibility to the unfortunate people, still in the cave, to rescue them and bring them into the light.

Plato on Poetry: The Ion

- Plato's most systematic comments on poetry occur in two texts, separated by several years. The first is *Ion*, where Socrates cross-examines a rhapsode (a singer and interpreter) called Ion on the nature of his art.
- The second, more sustained, commentary occurs in the *Republic*. In the *Ion*, Socrates points out that the rhapsode, like the poet himself, is in a state of "divine possession," and speaks not with his own voice which is merely a medium through which a god speaks.
- The Muse inspires the poet, who in turn passes on this inspiration to the rhapsode, who produces an inspired emotional effect on the spectators (*Ion*, 534c–e).

- Socrates likens this process to a magnet, which transmits its attractive power to a series of iron rings, which in turn pass on the attraction to other rings, suspended from the first set.
- The Muse is the magnet or loadstone, the poet is the first ring, the rhapsode is the middle ring, and the audience the last one (Ion, 533a, 536a–b).
- In this way, the poet conveys and interprets the utterances of the gods, and the rhapsode interprets the poets. Hence, the rhapsodes are “interpreters of interpreters” (Ion, 535a).

- The poet, insists Socrates, is “a light and winged thing, and holy, and never able to compose until he has become inspired, and is beside himself, and reason is no longer in him” (Ion, 534b). Not only poetry, according to Socrates, but even criticism is irrational and inspired.
- Hence, in this early dialogue, Plato has already sharply separated the provinces of poetry and philosophy; the former has its very basis in a divorce from reason, which is the realm of philosophy; poetry in its very nature is steeped in emotional transport and lack of self-possession.

Poetry in Plato's Republic

- Plato's theory of poetry in the Republic is much less flattering. His main concern in this text is to define justice and the ideal nature of a political state.
- Interestingly, his entire conception of justice arises explicitly in opposition to poetic authority and tradition.
- Socrates mentions "an ancient quarrel" between philosophy and poetry (Republic, 607b).

- Plato views poetry as a powerful force in molding public opinion, and sees it as a danger to his ideal city, ordered as this is in a strict hierarchy whereby the guardians (philosophers) and their helpers (soldiers) comprise an elect minority which rules over a large majority of farmers, craftsmen, and “money-makers” (415a–b; 434c).
- The program of education that he lays out for the rulers or guardians of the city consists of gymnastics and music.
- The Greek word *mousike*, as its form suggests, refers broadly to any art over which the Muses preside, including poetry, letters, and music (401d–e).

- The general charge against poetry is elucidated in book X, where Plato presents the poet as a “most marvelous Sophist” and a “truly clever and wondrous man” who “makes all the things that all handicraftsmen severally produce” (X, 596c–d).
- The political implication here is that poetry can have no definable (and therefore limited) function in a state ordered according to a strict hierarchy of inexchangeable function.
- Poetry literally does not know its place: it spreads its influence limitlessly, dissolving social relations as it pleases and recreating them from its own store of inspired wisdom whose opacity to reason renders it resistant to classification and definition.

- In this sense, poetry is the incarnation of indefinability and the limits of reason. It is in its nature a rebel, a usurper, which desires to rule; and as such it is the most potent threat to the throne of philosophy, which is also the throne of polity in the state of the philosopher-king.

- All in all, Plato's indictment of poetry has been based on
 - (1) its intrinsic expression of falsehood,
 - (2) its intrinsic operation in the realm of imitation,
 - (3) its combination of a variety of functions,
 - (4) its appeal to the lower aspects of the soul such as emotion and appetite, and
 - (5) its expression of irreducible particularity and multiplicity rather than unity.

- The notion of imitation, in fact, complements truth as the basis of Plato's opposition of philosophy and poetry.
- In book X the poet is held up as a Sophist, a “marvelous” handicraftsman who can “make” anything (X, 596c–d). And what the poet imitates is of course the appearance, not the reality, of things, since he merely imitates what others actually produce (X, 596e, 597e).

- Plato elaborates his famous triad: we find three beds, one existing in nature, which is made by God; another which is the work of the carpenter; and a third, the work of the painter or poet. Hence, the carpenter imitates the real bed and the painter or poet imitates the physical bed. The poet's work, then, like that of the rhapsode, is the "imitation of an imitation." It is thrice removed from truth (X, 597e).

Thank You