



SRI AKILANDESWARI WOMEN'S COLLEGE WANDIWASH

**Introduction to Literary Criticism
PLATO**

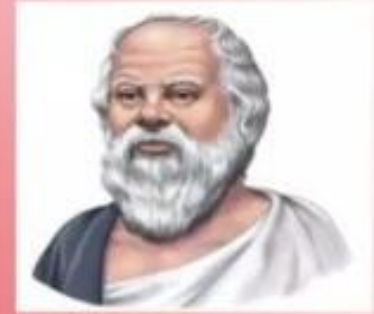
Class: UG ENGLISH

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HIS AGE AND WORKS



- ❖ 427 BC–348 BC
- ❖ Most celebrated disciple of Socrates.
- ❖ Athenian art and literature – weak [wane]
- ❖ Place taken by philosophy and oratory
- ❖ Chief priests –
 - Parmenides, Empedocles, Socrates – philosophers
 - Gorgias, Antiphon and Lysias – orators
- ❖ National character/ standard of social & public life –decline
- ❖ Philosophers– discuss– great variety of matters – of concern to the citizen and state, applying the test of reason to each.
- ❖ Socrates– dispassionate quest for truth – challenged – value of literature to society, its nature and functions.
- ❖ Previous age– creative activity
- ❖ 4th century BC – age of critical inquiry and analysis.

- ❖ Plato – not a professed critic of literature.
 - ❖ Chief interest– philosophical investigation – Dialogues
 - ❖ Question answer form.
 - ❖ Number of interlocutors– chief – Socrates
 - ❖ Socrates profound truths– form the philosophical system of Plato.
 - ❖ Aim: to commend his masters teaching to the learned men of all ages.

Other Works:

- ❖ *Ion*
- ❖ *Cratylus*
- ❖ *Protagoras*
- ❖ *Gorgias,*
- ❖ *Symposium*
- ❖ *Republic*
- ❖ *Phaedrus*
- ❖ *Phileous*
- ❖ *Laws*

Philosophical Discussions/ Dialogues

HIS VIEW OF ART

- Painting, sculpture, etc. -art
- Literature is an Art.

Theory of Ideas: [Republic]

- Ideas- ultimate reality
- Things -conceived as ideas - before they take practical shape as things.
- Eg: tree - a concrete embodiment of its image in idea.
- Idea - original ; thing - copy
- Copy - once removed from reality
- So Art - merely copies a copy : it is twice removed from reality.
- things themselves-imperfect copy of the ideas from which they spring.
- Their reproduction in art - more imperfect.
- Take men away from reality rather than towards it.

Plato judged all Human endeavour based on two things:

- art neither mould character.
- nor promote well-being of the state.

Plato Condemns:

Art's incapacity to get to the root of things, being concerned with only a semblance of them twice removed from reality.

HIS ATTACK ON POETRY

- ❖ *Poetic Inspiration*
- ❖ *The Emotional Appeal of Poetry*
- ❖ *Its Non-Moral Character*

Plato's other grounds of condemnation

Poetic Inspiration

- ❖ The poet writes because he is 'inspired'.
- ❖ The Muse suddenly fills him and makes him sing.

Can such a sudden outpouring of the soul be a reliable substitute for truths based on reason?

- ❖ The poets utterances contain a profound truth- but this appears only when they have been subjected to the test of reason.
- ❖ By themselves - not safe guides.
- ❖ So Poetry cannot take the place of philosophy.
- ❖ Poetry cannot be relied upon to make the individual a better citizen and the state a better organization.

No poets in the ideal Commonwealth, unless they happened to be those who composed 'hymns to the gods and panegyrics on famous men.'

-Plato's condemnation

The Emotional Appeal of Poetry

- ❖ Poetry – Product of inspiration – affects the emotion rather than reason – heart rather than the intellect.
- ❖ Picture of Life – overpower the emotions – hold reason prisoner.
- ❖ Emotions – impulses of the moment – like poetic inspiration.
- ❖ Emotions cannot be safe guides as reason.
- ❖ Emotion – considers everything coolly before allowing itself to any direction.
- ❖ Example: tragic poetry – weeping and wailing – to move the hearts of the spectator.
- ❖ *Republic*: “ If we let our own sense of pity grow strong by feeding upon the griefs of others it is not easy to restrain in the case of our own sufferings”.

Poetry “fed and watered the passions instead of drying them up, and let them rule instead of ruling them as they ought to be ruled, with a view to the happiness and virtue of mankind”
–Plato's condemnation

Its Non-Moral Character

- ❖ Indicts poetry for its lack of concern with morality.
- ❖ Treatment of life- virtue and vice - alike -without regard for moral considerations.
- ❖ Virtue -grief -literature- Plato- pain -epics of Homer, the narrative verse of Hesiod, the odes of Pindar, tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.
- ❖ Portraits of gods and heroes -equally objectionable.
 - ❖ Gods- unjust/ revengeful/guilty of other vices
 - ❖ Heroes- under the sway of uncontrollable passion of all kinds - pride, anger, grief, etc..
 - ❖ Such literature corrupted both the citizen and the state.

They give us to understand that many evil liverers are happy and many righteous men unhappy; and that wrong-doing, if it be undetected, is profitable, while honest dealing is beneficial to one's neighbour, but damaging to one's self"
- Republic [Plato's Condemnation]

The Function of Poetry

- ✓ Mere pleasure cannot be its object. [although it pleases].
- ✓ Art cannot be conceived as divorced from morals.

Suggests –The Test of Poetry: What contribution it makes to the knowledge of virtue?

- ✓ Mould character– promote the interests of the state.
- ✓ Pleasure, even of the highest kind, ranks low in Plato's scale of values.
- ✓ *A poet is a good artist only in so far as he is a good teacher.*
- ✓ *Poetic Truth must be the highest truth–ideal forms of justice, goodness, beauty, and the like.*

“We must look for artists who are able out of the goodness of their own natures to trace the nature of beauty and perfection, that so our young men, like persons who live in a healthy place, may be perpetually influenced for good.”

–*Republic*

HIS COMMENTS ON DRAMA

- ❖ **Its Appeal to Baser Instincts**
- ❖ **Effects of Impersonation**
- ❖ **Tragic and Comic Pleasure**

- Dramatic writing - branch of poetry
- Drama - as much removed from reality, product of inspiration, emotional appeal, unconcerned with morality- as those of poetry.

Its Appeal to Baser Instincts

- ❖ Drama- meant to be staged.
- ❖ Approval/disapproval- depends on heterogeneous multitude
- ❖ In order to please - dramatist often introduces what they like
 - quarrels, lamentations - tragedy
 - imitation of thunder, cries of beasts - comedy
- ❖ Arouses baser instincts- [normal life-feel ashamed]
- ❖ Leads to bad taste and laxity in discipline
- ❖ Plato censored such plays

Effects of Impersonation

- ❑ Drama reacts unfavourably on the actors themselves
- ❑ Constantly impersonating evil characters like cowards, knaves, and criminals- let these evil qualities enter into their own nature - detriment their natural self.
- ❑ Acting is not a healthy exercise.
- ❑ Represses individuality and leads to enfeeblement of character.
- ❑ Plato admits - where the characters impersonated represent the cream of humanity- men of courage, wisdom, or virtue.
- ❑ By force of habit - the same qualities are stimulated in him.
- ❑ Those tragedies therefore that represent the best and noblest in life are of positive benefit to the community and deserve to be encouraged.

Tragic and Comic Pleasure

- The pleasure aroused by tragedy and comedy
- What is it in a painful scene that causes pleasure?
- Human nature- mixture of heterogeneous feelings- anger, envy, fear, grief, etc.- which are painful by themselves -affords pleasure when indulged in excess.
- Comedy - [Plato knew only the satirical kind] -the pleasure takes the form of laughter at what we see on the stage.
 - a coward behaving as a brave man
 - a fool as a wise man
 - a cheat as an honest man etc.
- ❖ The source of laughter- incongruity between what he is and what he pretends to be.
- ❖ Such pleasure- malicious.
- ❖ Plato hits upon a profound truth: no character can be comic unless he is lovable. But Plato warns against too frequent indulgence in laughter- affects seriousness of conduct required to do great deeds.

HIS OBSERVATION ON STYLE

- Plato lived in an age of oratory – lays down a few principles of good speech– apply equally to good writing. [*Phaedrus*]
- *1. Thorough knowledge of the subject one is to speak on.*
- *2. impress the hearers.*
 - Natural Gift – Knowledge of its rules– constant practice in the work.
- *3. his thoughts upon his subject must follow each other in a natural sequence.*
- He can communicate himself best to his hearers.

Hearers: – men like himself

- with their own whims and prejudices
- likes and dislikes
- ideas and attitudes

- *4. have a knowledge of human psychology to get into the hearer's heart and soul..*

THE VALUE OF HIS CRITICISM

- ✓ Plato – A discerning critic of poetry and drama.
- ✓ Thorough insight into nature, function and method.
- ✓ **Truth as the test of poetic greatness** – awareness of the difference between the truths of poetry and the truth of life.
- ✓ **Disapproval of the non-moral character of the poetic art** – implied the difference between the *function* of poetry and the function of philosophy.
 - poetry– delight
 - philosophy – instruction
- ✓ **Attack on the emotional appeal of poetry** – indirectly discerned the poetic method –to persuade by pleasing, to make one feel rather than think.
- ✓ His observations on the **sources of tragic and comic pleasure**
- ✓ Thoughtful analysis of the essentials of spoken and written speech.
- ✓ He hits poetry and drama the hardest
 - score of lack of moral teaching
 - indulgence in unrestrained emotion, or melodramatic or farcical scenes.

- ✓ He was the first to see that all art is **imitation** or *mimesis*, imitating the objects of life or Nature.
- ✓ That there are two kinds of art :
 - Fine Arts**– literature, painting, sculpture and music – indulged in for mere pleasure.
 - Useful Arts** – medicine, agriculture, cookery – cooperate with Nature
- ✓ We owe the **division of poetry**:
 - dithyrambic*/purely lyrical
 - the purely *mimetic*/ imitative [drama – life is imitated in action and speech.
 - mixed kind – epic– the poet partly indulges in lyrical flights and partly introduces action and speech.
 - Epic superior to drama.** – a verdict upheld by later generations.
- ✓ **Principles of art/ style**:
 - ✓ Well thought out matter
 - ✓ A knowledge of its technique
 - ✓ Constant practice in it
 - ✓ Unity of design/ the interweaving of the parts into an inseparable whole.

To interpret poetry aright it is necessary to have a knowledge of poetry as a whole and of the principles of its composition.

– *'Ion'* by Plato

THANK YOU