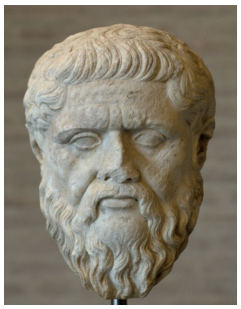
the Renaissance and continues to be crucial to an understanding of philosophical issues even today. Although, the acceptability of his ideas and doctrines has always been the subject of energetic debate, no one can deny Plato's persistent influence on the history of Western philosophy. This unit shall try to address Plato's views on poetry as available in his *Republic* (Book X). Plato discusses his views on poetry in Book II and III, and more extensively in Book X. You will finally learn that it is in *Republic* that Plato ponders over the the moral effects of poetry in the discussion of which we come across the concept of "imitation" (*mimesis*).

2.3 PLATO: THE CRITIC [Adapted from Norton Anthology]

A colossal figure in the history of Western philosophy; Plato looms large in the history of European literary theory. Many literary scholars often argue that Plato marks the beginning of the tradition of literary theory, although his choice of the dialogue form suggests that the issue he raises had already been debated among the historical personages like the pre-Socratic philosophers. Nearly all Dialogues attributed to Plato hint at almost every important issue that interests philosophers, such as – the nature of being; the question of how we come to know things; the proper ordering of human society and the nature of justice, truth; the good, beauty, and love.



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org

Plato was born about four years after the beginning of the twenty-five-year-long Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, and just after the death of the great Athenian statesman Pericles. His parents both came from distinguished Athenian families, and his stepfather, an associate of Pericles, was an active participant in the political and cultural life of 5th century Athens. Plato had two older brothers, Glaucon and Adeimantus, who appear as characters in his longest dialogue; *Republic* (375 BC). As a young man, growing up in a city at war and in constant political turmoil, Plato seems to have been destined for a



The older philosopher was a close friend of Plato's family, and Plato's writings attest to Socrates' great influence on him. Indeed, the position of Socrates in European philosophy is unique. Though he apparently never wrote a word, his influence on subsequent thought through his followers, Plato in particular, is incalculable.

political career. However, after the Peloponnesian War ended in 405, with the defeat and humiliation of Athens, the excesses of Athenian political life under the oligarchical rule (404-403) of the so-called Thirty Tyrants and under the restored democracy, left Plato disillusioned with political life. The execution in 399 of his master Socrates, on charges of impiety and corrupting the young, was a turning point in his life.

After Socrates' death, Plato retired from Athenian political life and travelled for a number of years. In 388, he journeyed to Italy and Sicily, where he became the friend of Dionysius I, the ruler of Syracuse, and his brother-In-law Dion. The following year he returned to Athens, where he founded the Academy, an institution devoted to research and instruction in philosophy and the sciences. He taught there for the rest of his life. Plato envisioned the Academy as a school for statesmen where he could train a new kind of philosopher-ruler (or "guardian") according to the principles set forth in his *Republic.* Unlike the older sophist Gorgias or Plato's contemporary rival Isocrates, who both taught the arts of Rhetoric and persuasion, Plato in his Academy, focused primarily on mathematics, logic, and philosophy. However, when Dionysius died in 367, Dion Invited Plato to return to Syracuse to undertake the philosophical education of the new ruler Dlonyslus II. Plato went, perhaps with the hope of putting the theory of *Republic* into practice; but philosophy proved no match for local politics, further arousing Dionysius's suspicion that resulted in Plato's brief Imprisonment.

Today Plato is recognised as a master of the dialogue form and as one of the great prose stylists of the Greek language. His works consist of some 35 dramatic dialogues on philosophical and related themes. The central problematic posed by this form is that it becomes virtually impossible to attribute any statement directly to Plato: as he never speaks in his own person. For the most part, Plato places his arguments in the mouths of characters who may or may not be based on historical persons. The speakers can never be assumed to be voicing Plato's own views or the views of those whose names they bear. In almost all the dialogues, Socrates is the focal character and Plato's mouthpiece, but

Plato's Socrates is not the historical Socrates. These complications, which thwart efforts to fix Plato's thought within a series of propositional statements, have attracted much attention, especially from late-20th century poststructuralist philosophers like Jacques Derrida.

The chronology of Plato's dialogues is highly controversial, but most scholars divide the works roughly into three periods. The earliest works, begun after 399, include the *Apology of Socrates* and *Crito,* in which Plato defends Socrates against the charges that led to his death; *Gorgias,* in which Socrates' opponent is the sophist Gorgias; and *Ion*, which examines poetry as a kind of divine madness. Characteristic of these early Platonic dialogues is Socrates' disarming claim of ignorance and a formal technique of cross-examination called *elenchus* a method of questioning designed to lead a learner through stages of reasoning and to expose the contradictions in an opponent's original statement. This method of "emptying out" the question by Socrates to reveal his opponents' ignorance is especially evident in his discussion of poetry with Ion, a rhapsode (professional reciter of epic poetry).

The middle period, from 380 to 367, includes the *Symposium, Cratylus,* and *Republic,* all begun after the founding of the Academy. They develop the theory of Forms or Ideas anticipated in the early dialogues. The Forms constitute a realm of unchanging being to which the world of individual mutable objects is subordinate. Because the Forms are immutable, they are more real-and truer than the changeable material world. The Form of the Good enjoys a unique status, for it is responsible for the being and intelligibility of the world as a whole.

To the late period (366-360) belong *Timaeus,* which throughout the Middle Ages was Plato's most widely known work; *Critias; Sophist;* and *Phaedrus,* the latter closing with a notorious attack on writing.

In *Ion,* Plato's Socrates engages Ion in a debate about the nature of the rhapsode's knowledge of poetry, about the nature of poetry, and about the status of knowledge itself. Poetry, Socrates maintains, is not an art; it is a form of divine madness: "the poet is an airy thing, winged and holy, and he is not able to make poetry until he becomes inspired and

goes out of his mind." This debate between the claims of inspiration and those of art would subsequently have a long history in European literary criticism. Plato's Socrates goes a step further: "You are powerless to speak of Homer," he tells Ion, "on the basis of knowledge or mastery." Socrates uses the image of a magnet as a metaphor for divine inspiration: as a magnet attracts iron and passes that attraction along, so the gods inspire the artist, who inspires the Interpreter, who, In turn, inspires the audience. For Plato's Socrates, the work of poet and critic is not divided between inspiration and rational analysis; rather, it lies on a continuum, and the work of the critic is no more rational than that of the poet, the critic's knowledge no more truthful…"



LET US KNOW

However, it is helpful when reading Plato to remember that his dialogues do not always present a straightforward argument or arrive at a single unambiguous conclusion. The process of elenchus and Socrates' persistent irony often make it difficult to pin him down to anyone position. In *Ion,* is Socrates making fun of the pomposity of the rhapsode, or does he seriously believe that whatever truth emerges from poetry and the interpretation of poetry results only from divine madness?

On the surface, it might seem that *Ion* treats poetry very differently than does the later *Republic,* where Plato's Socrates argues that far from being divinely inspired, poets lie and ought to be banished from the ideal republic or, at the very least, heavily censored and kept in check. However, *Ion* presents a view of knowledge that is consistent with the weightier arguments of *Republic.* However divinely inspired, Socrates argues, poets' and critics' knowledge is of a different order.

To understand Socrates' remarks about knowledge, we need to understand the centrality of poetry to Greek education. In a culture in which the idea of literacy was relatively new, knowledge was frequently

encoded and passed on through the devices of music and poetry. The instruction provided by the Sophists and by Plato's main rival, Isocrates, was almost exclusively Rhetorical and literary. Even in *Republic,* a book concerned with the ideal education of the guardians and citizens, Socrates divides schooling into physical training for the body and music and poetry for the soul. Socrates' criticism of poetry and its representations appears to be directed against a culture that, believed literally "that poets know all crafts, all human affairs." In such a culture/ Socrates' insistence makes more sense: a poet needs to know a horse the way a horseman knows a-horse. In his Academy, however, Plato promoted a learning whose foundation was dialectics, dialogue, and philosophical, reasoning.

The critique of mimesis in both the *Allegory of the Cave* and *Republic (Book X)*, explore the nature of knowledge and its proper objects. The world we perceive through the senses, Socrates argues, is illusory and deceptive; it depends on a prior realm of separately existing Forms, organised beneath the Form of Good. The realm of Forms is accessible not through the senses, as is the world of appearances, but only through rigorous philosophic discussion and thought, based on 'mathematical reasoning'. For Plato's Socrates, measuring, counting, and weighing all bring us closer to the realm of Forms than do poetry's pale representations of nature. All art and poetry, because they represent what is already an inferior representation of the true original (the Forms), can only lead further away from the truth, and further into a world of illusion and deception. Virtually every subsequent defence of poetry (memorable examples include those by Aristotle, Sir Philip Sidney, Aphra Behn, P B Shelley) has had to come to terms with Plato's devastating attack on poetry as inferior and deceptive mimesis.

This way, we can assume that Plato is the progenitor of Western didactic criticism and theory: the idea that literature should serve moral and social functions: *Republic,* where he describes an ideal well-regulated community in which the educational curriculum promotes respect for law, reason, authority, self-discipline; and piety, has been especially influential.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How was the teaching in Plato's Academy different from the Sophists'?

Q 2: What is the nature of Plato's Dialogues?

Q 3: What does Socrates state about poetry in Plato's *Ion*?

Q 4: Which are the three periods of Plato's dialogues?

Q 5: Mention the significance of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave."

2.4 IMPORTANT CONCEPTS IN *REPUBLIC* (BOOK X)

The following are the important aspects of Plato's *Republic* (Book X).

Platonic Theory of Forms :

Plato's theory of forms occurs in Book VII of the *Republic.* Plato likens the physical world to shadows, a cave (his 'Myth of the Cave'), from which men who are enlightened will ascend to the world of Forms. At this stage, we have to be sensitive to the fact that Plato was influenced by pre-Socratic thinkers like Heraclitus and Parmenides, who insisted on the physical world, knowable through our senses, as the world of "appearances." For Plato, the world of forms is the world of essences, of universality, changeless and eternal, each Form being a wide category capable of including many objects in the physical world. For Plato, the world of Forms, alone constitutes reality because these Forms are eternal and unchanging. These are essences; they are universal and exist in a world of unity. A Form is actually a category under which diverse objects of the physical world can be brought. A Table is a Form under which all objects which are used for supporting or displaying things can be included if they perform this function. In this manner, the theory allows to bring together disparate objects by referring them to a common essence. Thus, the theory enables us to make sense of the immense diversity of our experiences in the world.

Plato's Views on Poetry (Mimesis) :

At this point, let us also observe Plato's views on poetry. In one sense, artistic and literary theory begins with Plato's idea of 'mimesis'. In

his Dialogues, Plato points to inspiration behind poetry rather than wisdom: poetry as an element of education' the aims of poetic composition, the difference between speech and writing, and the relation of words to things. In *Ion*, Socrates cross-examines a rhapsode (a singer) regarding his art. As the investigation proceeds, it becomes clear that since a rhapsode only interprets what the poet conveys through divine inspiration, the rhapsodes are "interpreters of interpreters". What the rhapsode knows is not through knowledge but through divine inspiration.

In the *Republic*, Plato mentions an "ancient quarrel" between poetry and philosophy. The question of mimesis is closely linked to Plato's concern with justice. Mimesis, for him, is not simply an aesthetic category. It involves wider issues of social organisation, political structure, education. Mimesis is seen to run counter to reason and justice. In the ideal state, where its future guardians will receive their education and training, the ethical training will have to include stories since these will be important to their moral education. It is, while on this question of the kind of stories to be told to the future guardians that Plato turns deeper into the issue. The stories should be such as to induce good behaviour, not the opposite. In Book X of *Republic* containing the 'allegory of the cave', Plato views the world as an imitation, a copy of the world of essences. Following on this argument, artistic images are mere shadows of what they imitate. Artistic images present the appearances of things and not their real truth. Thus, images are inherently corrupting because they deal with appearance. Mimesis gives us 'phantoms', not essential, real things. Since images do not give us rational truth, they are inherently corrupting for the philosopher as well. Since the poet, like the painter or the artist, makes images or appearances of 'phantoms', it follows that the poet's activity which is far from proper knowledge, must be strictly monitored.

So, what was Plato's view of poetry in relation to his ideal Republic? The argument can be traced through the ways in which Socrates, as the speaker in the *Republic*, reveals the notion of justice to be in keeping with poetic tradition. In other words, the notion of justice is derived from Homer's epic. In Book III of the *Republic*, Plato distinguishes

different genres of poetry by their distinctive uses of imitation. In Book X, he reinforces his objection to "imitative" poetry and reiterates his earlier point that the imitator imitates what the craftsman makes. For Plato the imitator is the craftsman of images. Through Book X, Plato turns his attention to the relationship between painting and poetry as well as to the relation between imitation and craftsmanship.

Mimesis or Representation *from Norton Anthology :*

Plato and his student Aristotle both agree that mimesis (imitation or representation) is a key feature of poetry, but they conceive of and evaluate it quite differently. Plato has his spokesperson Socrates disapprove of' poetry's imitation of reality because poetry cannot depict truth and teach morality and that it is irrational-based on inspiration, not knowledge. As an idealist philosopher, Plato locates reality in a transcendent world of eternal Forms or Ideas that only reason can properly apprehend; this world is distinct from the illusory phenomenal world of our senses, which poetry represents. For Plato, "the material world is at best an imperfect copy of the original transcendent world of Ideas, and poetry is but a degraded copy of a copy. He concludes that poetic representation threatens social stability by offering false images and unsuitable role models. In *Republic*, therefore, he has Socrates recommend that it be banished from the ideal society, except perhaps that poetry which praises the gods and avoids representing them in an unseemly fashion.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: How does Plato view the Theory of Forms?

Q 7: What is Plato's views on Poetry in general?

2.5 RECEPTION OF PLATO AS A CRITIC

For centuries after Plato's death, the Academy continued though its members deviated from Platonic teachings in several striking ways.

Within a century (276 BC), the school had become a centre for the philosophy of the Skeptics under Archesilaus. Revivals of some versions of Platonism were undertaken both at the Academy itself under Antiochus of Ascalon (87 BC) and elsewhere. For example, "Middle Platonism" developed at the same time in Athens and Alexandria (which included Plutarch). Neoplatonism began with Plotinus in Rome and continued until Justinian closed the pagan schools in 529 CE. In many ways, the Neoplatonism continued to provide a significant source of ideas for later medieval thinkers.

Plato's influence though transformed and reshaped by the Middle Platonists and the Neoplatonists, can be found later in the conceptions of temporal order and eternity in Augustine and Boethius, and in other ideas among the medieval rationalists, especially Anselm. The Platonic conception of knowledge, as derived from and secured by innate and infallible cognitive capacities, makes contact with a truth or reality that is independent of the human senses, continued after the Enlightenment in the philosophies of what have come to be known as the Continental Rationalists, most notably Rene´ Descartes, Benedict (Baruch) de Spinoza, and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. It echoes even later in the transcendentalism of Immanuel Kant, the British idealist Francis Herbert Bradley, and, later still, in the American transcendentalists, most notably Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Despite the persistent debate about the nature of Plato's writings, they continue to be read in philosophy, justice, and history courses alike because the works pose philosophical problems and questions that remain intricate enough to challenge those who think critically about serious issues.



2.6 LET US SUM UP

From this unit, you have learnt about many important aspects of Plato's criticism. Although Plato did not set out to write systematic literary theory, unlike his disciple Aristotle who produced a treatise on poetics, his consideration of philosophical issues in several of the dialogues leads him to reflect on poetry which has often set the terms of literary debate

in the West. What binds together Plato's various discussions of poetry is a distrust of miss-representation or imitation. According to Plato, art, including poetry, as can be found in *Republic*, is a mimesis of nature, a copy of objects in the physical world. But, those objects in the material world, according to the idealist philosophy that Plato propounds, are themselves only mutable copies of timeless universals, called Forms or Ideas. Poetry is merely a copy of a copy, leading away from the truth rather than toward it. Philosophers and literary, critics ever since, from Plotinus in the third century C.E. to Jacques Derrida in the late 20th century, have wrestled with the terms of Plato's critique of poetry, revising it or attempting to point out inconsistencies in his argument.



2.7 FURTHER READING

Entry on Plato in *Gale Contextual Encyclopaedia of World Literature*. (Vol. 3).

Habib, M. A. R. (2005). *A History of Literary Criticism*: *From Plato to the Present.* Delhi: Blackwell Publishing.

Plato. (2007). *The Republic.* Penguin Classics.

Thomas, Keith. (Gen ed). (1999). *Greek Philosophers.* (Past Masters Series). UK: Oxford University Press.

Vincent B. Leitch. (Ed). (2001). *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: Norton.

Wimsatt, William K., & Brooks, Cleanth. (1957). *Literary Criticism*: *A Short History.* New Delhi: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.



2.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: Plato's Academy was an institution devoted to research and instruction in philosophy and the sciences… …He envisioned the Academy as a school for statesmen where he could train a new kind of philosopher-ruler or the "guardian"… …unlike the older sophist Gorgias or Plato's contemporary rival Isocrates teaching

the arts of Rhetoric and persuasion, Plato focused primarily on mathematics, logic and philosophy.

Ans to Q No 2: Plato places his arguments in the mouths of characters who may or may not be based on historical persons… …the speakers can never be assumed to be voicing Plato's own views or the views of those whose names they bear… … Socrates is the focal character and Plato's mouthpiece in most of the dialogues.

Ans to Q No 3: In *Ion* Socrates engages Ion in a debate about the nature of the rhapsode's knowledge of poetry, about the nature of poetry, and about the status of knowledge itself… … poetry is not an art; it is a form of divine madness.

Ans to Q No 4: The first period include the *Apology of Socrates* and *Crito* in which Plato defends Socrates against the charges that led to his death; *Gorgias;* and *Ion* which examines poetry as a kind of divine madness… …the middle period includes the *Symposium, Cratylus,* and *Republic* all develop his theory of Forms… …the last include *Timaeus,* which throughout the Middle Ages was Plato's most widely known work; and other works such as *Critias; Sophist;* and *Phaedrus.*

Ans to Q No 5: The world we perceive through the senses, Socrates argues, is illusory and deceptive; it depends on a prior realm of separately existing Forms, organised beneath the Form of Good. The realm of Forms is accessible not through the senses, as is the world of appearances, but only through rigorous philosophic discussion and thought, based on 'mathematical reasoning.

Ans to Q No 6: The world of forms is the world of essences, of universality, changeless and eternal, each Form being a wide category capable of including many objects in the physical world. For Plato, the world of Forms, alone constitutes reality because these Forms are eternal and unchanging. These are essences; they are universal and exist in a world of unity.

Ans to Q No 7: Plato's view on poetry begins with Plato's idea of 'mimesis'… …In his Dialogues, Plato points to inspiration behind

poetry rather than wisdom which means—poetry as an element of education, the aims of poetic composition, the difference between speech and writing, and the relation of words to things etc… …In *Ion*, Socrates cross-examines a rhapsode (a singer) regarding his art… …a rhapsode only interprets what the poet conveys through divine inspiration… …the rhapsodes are "interpreters of interpreters"… …what the rhapsode knows is not through knowledge but through divine inspiration.



2.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: How does the dialogue form help in philosophical inquiry, according to Plato? Discuss.

Q 2: Explain the ways, Plato engages himself with the discussions of poetry as well as poetic inspiration in his famous dialogue *Republic* (Book X)

Q 3: Who was Socrates? In what way can you get to know about Socrates through Plato's Dialogues?

Q 4: How does Plato's Republic helps to understand the Platonic theory of Representation? Discuss with reference to the text prescribed.

Q 5: Write a note on Plato's contributions in Ancient Greek Criticism? Do you think that Plato succeeded in asking 'philosophical' questions? Give your reasons.

Q 6: What, according to you, are the major concerns of Classical Roman criticism? Elaborate with reference to Longinus's "On the Sublime"?

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