

Banha University - Faculty of Arts
English Department

MA Program

Literary Criticism
Lecture 1

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2019-2020



Lecture I: Ancient Greek Criticism

Classical Literary Criticism:
Intellectual and Political
Backgrounds

PLATO (428–CA. 347 BC)

- It is widely acknowledged that the Greek philosopher Plato laid the foundations of Western philosophy.
- Most of Plato's philosophy is expounded in dialogue form, with Socrates usually cast as the main speaker. The canon attributed to Plato includes thirty-five dialogues and thirteen letters. The authenticity of some of the dialogues and of all the letters has been questioned.

The theory of Forms

According to Plato, the world of Forms, being changeless and eternal, alone constitutes reality. It is the world of essences, unity, and universality, whereas the physical world is characterized by perpetual change and decay, mere existence (as opposed to essence), multiplicity and particularity. These contrasts become clearer if we consider that each Form is effectively a name or category under which many objects in the physical world can be classified. Returning to the example of the bed, we might say that there are numerous objects constructed for the purpose of sleeping on; what they have in common is a given kind of construction which facilitates this function, say, a flat surface with four legs; hence they fall under the general category of “bed.” Similarly, “Goodness” – which Plato regards as the primal Form – can be used to classify a broad range of actions and attitudes, which would otherwise remain mutually disparate and unconnected. The theory of Forms

Plato on Poetry

Plato makes comments on poetry in many of his dialogues. In the *Apology*, Socrates affirms that poetry derives from inspiration rather than wisdom, and he also remarks on the pretensions of poets to knowledge that they do not possess.

Not only poetry, according to Socrates, but even criticism is irrational and inspired. Hence, in this early dialogue, composed several years before the *Republic*, 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.

ARISTOTLE

(384–322 BC)

- The most brilliant student at Plato's Academy was Aristotle.
- At the heart of Aristotle's metaphysics and logic is the concept of substance.
- The notion of substance as formulated by Aristotle pervades the subsequent history of Western logic and metaphysics.
- From a historical perspective, it is worth remarking that Aristotle's view of substance as the subject of predication represents a sharp break from the Platonic Forms.

Aristotle's Poetics

- In the opening statement of his *Poetics*, Aristotle proposes to examine poetry “in itself.” We should not be misled by this statement into thinking that Aristotle somehow embraced some of our nineteenth- and twentieth-century notions of poetic autonomy.

Aristotle's *Poetics*

Aristotle's *Poetics* has often been analyzed in terms of its prescriptions for tragedy, its distinctions of tragedy, epic, and other genres, as well as its comments on plot and character. So profound has been the influence of these notions that in academic institutions to this day works of literature are analyzed through such categories as theme, character, plot, and authorial presence in the text. However, in assessing the significance of Aristotle's *Poetics* within the various traditions of literary criticism, and in understanding the position of poetry and the arts in Aristotle's general scheme, we need to consider the political, ethical, and metaphysical frameworks of his text. Like Plato, Aristotle considers the question of whether "music" should form an integral part of state education, especially for children. "Music," we need to recall, had a broad significance, encompassing not only performances using instruments and songs but also dancing, and it referred to the arts in general

Aristotle's General Views of Imitation and Action

Like Plato, Aristotle holds that poetry is essentially a mode of imitation.

But Aristotle propounds an entirely different view of imitation, one which leads him to regard poetry as having a positive function. For Plato, imitation itself embodied a step away from truth, since it produced an imperfect copy of the Form or essence of a given entity. In this sense, the entire world of physical phenomena for Plato was an imperfect imitation of the world of Forms. Poetry, for Plato, ranked even lower than the sensible world of appearances since it was obliged to imitate those appearances, which were already imitations of Forms. Aristotle, however, invests imitation with positive significance. Rather than viewing it as a necessarily denigrative activity, he sees it as a basic human instinct and allows it as an avenue toward truth and knowledge



The Concept of Imitation in the Poetics

Aristotle asserts that all the various modes of poetry and music are imitations. These imitations can differ in three ways: in the means used, in the kinds of objects represented, or in the manner of presentation. The means can include color, shape, sound, rhythm, speech, and harmony. The art that imitates by words, says Aristotle, is poetry. As against popular notions which equate poetry with the use of meter, Aristotle insists that the essential characteristic of the poet is imitation.

