
UNIT 6 CRITICISM AS DIALOGUE

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6.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall look at how

- Dialogue began—as a reproduction of an interesting conversation
- It developed into an argumentative dialogue
- It became popular in 'mime' and in "theatre".

6.1 INTRODUCTION

At its best dialogue as a classical genre was primarily a philosophical and investigative enterprise but even then it was not far from an art form. Besides unfolding a hypothesis, it was spoken by characters who were presented as persona befitting the opinion voiced by them. Dialogue was inter-related, from the very beginning, with all other forms of public speech. It was a form of oratory and rhetoric employed in various forums of Greek society such as the courts, political gatherings and theatre.

The beginnings of dialogue as a discernable genre are seen in the works of Herodotos and Thucydides. In narratives written by these authors, philosophical dialogues are debates between real or imaginary characters. The discussion between Solon and Croesus in the works of Herodotos and the so called Melian dialogue in the writings of Thucydides are two well known examples. These pieces were also influenced by the theatrical dialogues of the times.

6.2 DIALOGUE IN MIMES

In the development of the philosophical dialogue, the impact of the quasi theatrical art form called *mimos* was quite significant. *Mimos* or mime was one of the earliest modes of performance extant till fourth century A.D. Based on dance, early examples of this art are found in the "*deikeliktai*" or the masked men of Sparta, the "*autokabdali*" or the improvisors of Central Greece and the "*phlyakes*" of the Italian region. Early mime was performed in the market places, at banquets and weddings. It was a combination of story-telling, dance, mimicry, song and dialogue performed by acrobats and jugglers. Xenophon, a speaker of the Platonic *Symposium*, mentions a mime performed in a banquet, that tells the story of Dionysos and Ariadne.

A well known name among the mime writers in the fifth century B.C. was that of Sophron of Syracuse who composed pieces meant "for men" and "for women" in Dorian rhythmic prose close to the popular speech of the times full of common

proverbs. Some of the titles of Sophron's mimes, such as *The Women Quacks*, *The Old Fishermen* and *The Women Visitors to Isthmia* indicate that unlike tragedies and comedies this genre dealt with life at the lower rungs of society and was entirely comic in nature. The tradition of Sophron was kept alive by his son but not one title of any of his mimes has survived.

By the third century B.C. the influence exercised by the poetic dialogue of tragedy and comedy made the writers of mime use verse. Herodas, whose origin and place of operation are not known, produced literary mimes with dialogue in a metre of the iambic variety. Sticking to the old themes of the genre, his pieces like *The Bawd*, *The Pimp*, *The School Master*, *The Women Worshippers*, *The Jealous Mistress* and the *Dream* provide a wide variety of events that were covered by this highly popular and entertaining art form. It is important to note that unlike tragedy which was performed only twice a year for specific religious festivals, the mimetic shows were enacted all around the year. The dialogues of the mimes, therefore, exercised a far more pervasive influence on the shape that this genre took whether in theatre or even philosophical writings. Mime writers also remained in close interaction with poets of high standing because these genres like the epic and the bucolic poems often contained dialogues. Highly literary mimes such as those of Theocritus were also an acceptable genre and were sometimes sung or enacted.

The popularity of mimes increased with the decline of serious and high quality drama and as vulgarity and obscenity invaded the performances. They were given new names such as *paignia* and *hypothesis* and their performers were called *magodoi* and *mimologoi*. By this time any kind of serious and thoughtful interchange through dialogues had become impossible. The *Oxyrhynchos Papyri* contain a farcical mime in which a girl, Charition, escapes from the clutches of a South Indian king and his followers who speak what the western scholars thought to be "psuedo-Indian" but has now been claimed to be the ancient dialect called "Tulu", a precursor of the Kannada language. Mime had immense popularity in the Roman world as well, but because of its increasing vulgarity it came into conflict with the Christian Church and in spite of persecution by the religious establishments it survived into the Middle Ages as the art of performing *jongleurs*.

In all mime, because there was no concentration on action, but more so on creating odd characters and situations, dialogue became the focal point of interest. Although it was often sung dialogue, specially in the genre called the pantomime, the spirit of argumentation was well conveyed. It was the juxtaposition of opposing points of view that made the dialogue extremely interesting to the audience and a valid channel of criticism.

6.3 A KIND OF MIMESIS

It would be a mistake to presume that the ancients thought of dialogue as an actual reproduction of an argument that took place between two or more characters. The kind of conversation that is claimed to be reported with accuracy in today's media was beyond the intentions of ancient writers of dialogue in whatever form. Dialogue was regarded as a mimesis, an imitation, an artistic recreation of a supposed conversation or good talk between recognisable persons from historical or contemporary life but drawn as characters. In those times, realistic and accurate reporting of the words of the speakers was not the prime purpose. It was more significant to preserve the main ideas and the conflicting views supposedly upheld by the speakers.

The main theme of a dialogue was well stated, though digressions were considered essential to create greater interest. The situation for a given dialogue

was topical but the theme had to be of an enduring nature. In fact, the art of conversation was preserved by the epic, the mimetic and the theatrical tradition and recording of all important talks in philosophical, political or cultural arenas had to be done according to the tradition of mimetic dialogue.

It may as well be kept in mind that the primary purpose of dialogue as representational conversation was to offer a criticism of things. It was to bewail, lament or just to satirise in order to assess things as positively good or bad. It should also be kept in mind that unlike present day cultures that uphold a relativistic approach to moral problems and often regard pluralism as an ideal, ancient Greek culture, though being open-minded to a lot of sophistry, debate and discussion, insisted that the prevalent norms of conduct be followed rather strictly. Therefore, dialogue was primarily used as a means of social censure. It is wrong to imagine that merely the delight in free discussion by the leisured class was the aim of dialogue. It is an erroneous impression we may form today by reading the dialogues of Plato and Aristotle regarding them as teachers philosophising to friends and disciples of the aristocratic class. In the classical period, even at Athens, the views and activities of the philosophers were constantly under public scrutiny, sometimes even censure, culminating in public wrath as it happened with Socrates.

Dialogue was supposed to constantly redefine and uphold the norms of ethical behaviour. Socrates paved the way for philosophic analysis through the mode of dialogue.

6.4 SOCRATIC PARLANCE

The early forms of Socratic dialogue must have been the scribblings that his disciples and admirers made soon after their encounters with this rare man. From this developed, undoubtedly, the rewriting of these dialogues as mimetic creations based on earlier material. The major composers of these dialogues with Socrates were Plato, Xenophon and Aeschines.

In the Platonic Dialogues, some twenty-five in number, there is a wide variety of style and approach as they were composed by Plato over a long period of time with changes in his philosophic position. The earlier pieces such as *Laches*, *Charmides*, *Crito* and *Hippias Minor* are very much occupied with the projection of the personality of Socrates. In Plato's portrayal, the famous philosopher is shown as an ugly man with a magnetic mind. He was jovial, celebrative of life, good humoured and even erotic. He maintained austere habits and displayed great physical endurance. Judging from his own words in *Crito* he lived to be seventy if not more, but if "seventy years" is interpreted as adult age, then he was ninety at the time of his death.

The Socratic method of the earlier dialogues is to seek real knowledge which leads to the happiness of an individual as well as general and personal good. By asking various questions regarding knowledge of a particular thing or an idea, and rejecting all the answers to those questions, Socrates establishes that knowledge of a thing or a concept, is knowing the true "form" or "essence" of it and no example of this essence can be given. The Socratic method of first inviting others to give answers or suggesting answers himself and then pretending that each answer has almost hit the truth and then showing the contradiction with other solutions, is a dramatic device used with a good deal of humour or irony. But it is done with dead seriousness as the Platonic "essences" can be indicated only by revealing the contradictions entailed in any worldly hypothesis and conceptions. Dialogue is used here for juxtaposition of viewpoints in a dramatic clash.

In the middle period, of the dialogues such as *Phaedo*, *Symposium*, and *Republic*, the investigative stance is subdued and a more expository mode is adopted. More

is said on the nature of forms and better and clearer prescription on issues, in the *Republic*. In the last phase of *Parmenides*, *Sophists*, *Timeus* and the *Laws*, dialogue is severely reduced. Sometimes correct answers are given not by Socrates but by another "philosopher" in a didactic manner. Reduction of the dramatic suspense and the entertaining account of conflicting views seem to have been done deliberately. The purpose is not, as in the early dialogues, to show the philosopher as the seeker, full of doubt and visible conflict, but one who has already arrived and is a bringer of wisdom.

At this point we must point out the difference between the Greek method of dialogue making and the later European style of argument making. On the whole, the Greek dialogue preserved the ambience of truth emerging from an investigation or conversation held among many people. It also gives the impression of a group effort, though it may be the final word of a single person as in the case of the Socratic dialogue. The subject of the dialogue also is not clear from the beginning. In short the uncertainty of a conversational result is manifest in the Greek dialogue. Whereas in the European style of arguing the subject matter, the main premissis and the reasons for and against the thesis are all sequently laid out. The European tradition of argumentation which started with the writings of a theological nature and after the Renaissance exhibited a huge variety of subjects, actually followed not the Greek tradition of dialogue but that of oratory or legal speech rendering which we have commented upon in the first Unit. An oration was supposed to be divided into "parts of speech" such as introduction, narrative, statement, proofs and epilogue. Essay writing that began with Bacon and developed in the tracts of Sydney and Milton and then into expansive writings of Hegel and others, shaped as a series of reasons given to defend a thesis, has been derived from the structure of Greek speeches.

6.5 LATER TRADITION

The genre of dialogue writing so perfected by Plato was emulated by his disciple Aristotle. Most of the dialogues were written before the death of Plato and had acquired recognition in ancient times. Unfortunately they are extant in fragments only. But the short crisp conversation characterising Plato's dialogues was never taken up by Aristotle who preferred long expositions finally summed up by the writer himself. After him, there was a lull in dialogue writing and it was only after two centuries, that Plutarch and Loukianos produced some worthwhile pieces.

There are just a few dialogues of Plutarch of Chaironia that are extant. They lack the Platonic depth but are useful for gathering information on the way of life prevalent in during his times (circa A.D 50 to A.D 120). *De sollertia animalium* is a debate on the question of whether water animals are more intelligent than land animals. His other books are patterned after learned table talk. *De genio Socratis* combines history with the analysis of oracular powers, and *Amatorious* discusses eroticism. His Pythian dialogues, *Apud Delphos*, *de Pythiae oraculis*, *Daimones* and *Defectu oraculum* are very significant.

Lucian or Loukianos (born around A.D. 120 in Samosata and died around A.D. 180), who produced about eighty dialogues was a pleader and lecturer by profession who travelled far and wide. His earlier dialogues are full of satiric humour, and influenced a great deal by mime, ridiculing popular religious ideas, human vanity and philosophic pretensions. His later works were more serious under the influence of Plato. But he cannot be called an original stylist or thinker.

Dialogue writing was zestfully emulated in the Latin tradition though authors like Cicero preferred to evolve a form which was closer to the expository mode of Aristotle than the dramatic method of Platonic investigation.

The Sophists, a class of teachers, some of whom were also philosophers, promoted the preservation of the art of dialogue and rhetoric as part of the educational skills they imparted to their students. The sophists were mainly professional tutors who went around from city to city, teaching young men of rich families useful skills of the day such as, preparing speeches for political assemblies, courts of law, and other public gatherings. Sophistry, which in its degenerated form symbolised meaningless argumentation, in its better usage was the art of persuasion and discussion. In the Roman period, sophistry was restricted to literary exercises and after the second century declined under Christian impact which censured its association with pagan religion and philosophies.

6.6 INVESTIGATIVE VERSUS EXPOSITIONAL DIALOGUE

In the development of the analytical tools whether for the purpose of legal, dramatic or philosophical activity there are two clear stages. The first is the investigative method in which clear conclusions are indicated after a good deal of analysis. The second is the expository way in which a hypothesis is stated and amplified. Both the methods were never used exclusively but the first method dominated in the earlier phase which apexed in the dialogues of Socrates and the second came of age with Aristotle. The first coincided with the age of theatre and democracy, the second with tyrannies and imperialism. But beyond their location in Greek history, the two approaches became good examples of literary compositions for the later ages.

In later European writing, for instance, *Hamlet* and *The Divine Comedy* can be cited as modelled on the investigative and the expository traditions of the dialogue respectively. *Hamlet* works his way through endless questioning and comes to the conclusion that "ripeness is all". Dante explains the order of the universe through the enunciations of Beatrice on unquestioning faith "as the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things unseen." Similarly, enigmatic poets like Blake would fall in the first category and the expansive ones like Pope or even Wordsworth in the other. Examples could be found in literatures of the non-European languages also which felt the impact of Greek literature directly or indirectly after colonisation.

Broadly speaking, the ironic and the moralistic approaches are the two critical heritages of the Greek dialogue. For the sake of simplicity they may be traced back to methods employed by Plato and Aristotle respectively. These two approaches or frames of mind are to be seen not only in the literary tradition of later European writing but also among the philosophers. In literary works, poetry, fiction and drama can frequently be seen as falling into one category or the other. Even twentieth century understandings of dialogue content in poetry such as the "three voices" of poetry by T.S. Eliot, namely, the poet speaking to himself, the poet addressing others and the poet as a dramatic persona, are an expansion of the Greek tradition.

6.7 LET US SUM UP

The dialogue, like tragedy, is one of the special contributions of Hellenic culture to world literature. As a genre, it combines sharpness of investigation, whether of a social or a philosophic concern, with the imaginative rendering of the dramatic mode. It reflects the antidogmatic urge to dismantle established notions causing social oppression or intellectual sterility. It seems that as the art of conversation found various applications in Greek social life, dialogue as a formal way of preserving oral interchanges of significance in courts, political gatherings, theatre

and various performing arts, was recognised. Thus it became a mimesis that preserved the subject matter in an artistic way worthy of being handed down to future generations. It seems to have flourished most in times when democracy had an upper hand in the political system. However, it cannot be taken for granted that it reflects a society that attained a high degree of freedom. Socrates, the progenitor of the greatest dialogues was put to death, which he willingly accepted, for expounding his ideas through this very method of investigative and sceptical speech. Dialogue, thus exemplifies all the facets of the ancient mind : quest for truth, capacity to contradict and ridicule the established norms and an acceptance of the social boundaries set for the individual by custom and religious sanctions.

6.8 QUESTIONS

1. What are the earliest known examples of dialogue writing ?
2. How does the dramatic tradition contribute to the growth of dialogue ?
3. What are the most distinguishing features of the Socratic dialogue as found in the writings of Plato ?
4. How does Aristotle's dialogue writing differ from Plato's and what impact has it on later writings ?

6.9 GLOSSARY

Aeschines Socraticus

He is to be distinguished from the famous orator politician of the same name who lived half a century later and opposed Demosthenes. Aeschines the philosopher, named after Socrates for his association as a close disciple, was present at the condemnation and execution of his master. He was an orator as well and perhaps for a profession wrote speeches in the law courts. He nurtured Xenokritos as his disciple but was not very successful materially. To escape poverty he moved to the court of Syracuse but returned to Athens. Of his dialogues featuring Socrates are *Miltiades*, *Kallias*, *Axiochos*, *Aspasia*, *Telauges*, *Rinon*, and some others not verified as genuine.

6.10 SUGGESTED READING

Primary Texts

Plato. *The Dialogues of Plato*. Trans. Benjamin Jowett. 5 vols. 3rd Ed. Oxford, 1893.

The Republic. Trans, H.D.P. Lee. Penguin, 1955.

Symposium. Trans. W. Hamilton. Penguin, 1951.

Secondary Text

Morrison, Karl F. *The Mimetic Tradition of Reform in the West*. New Jersey: University of Princeton, 1982.