

An Examination of Philosophy as Literature from Arthur Danto's Perspective: A Case Study of Plato's *Phaedo*

Ainaz asgharynia 

1. MA in Philosophy of Art, Department of Literature and Foreign Languages, Allameh Tabatabai University Master of Comparative Literature, Department of Literature and Foreign Languages, Allameh Tabatabai University. Email: asgharyniaainaz70@gmail.com

Article Info (۶۹-۹۳)

ABSTRACT

Article type:
Research
Article

Article history:

Received:
۱۸/۰۹/۲۰۲۴

Accepted:
۰۵/۰۱/۲۰۲۵

Keywords:
Arthur
Danto
Plato
Philosophical
tragedy
Phaidon

In his article titled "Philosophy as Literature/Philosophy and Literature/Philosophy of Literature," Arthur Danto argues that literary forms and techniques played a significant role in the philosophers' exposition of their ideas, but these characteristics have often been overlooked in the analysis of philosophical works. Interdisciplinary researchers have frequently analyzed literary works from the perspective of philosophical ideas or schools, but the examination of philosophical works from the standpoint of literary form and elements has received less attention. This research aims to draw researchers' attention to the role of literature within these texts by adopting Danto's distinct approach to the examination of philosophical works, and to study the interplay between literature and philosophy in a prominent philosophical work such as Plato's *Phaedo*, which exhibits distinct literary qualities. The study intends to use available resources to answer the question of why a great philosopher like Plato utilized the characteristics of a tragedy to present concepts such as the immortality of the soul, the transience of the body, and death, and how he portrayed the renowned Greek philosopher Socrates as a tragic hero for his audience. The research observes that literature possesses remarkable power in depicting philosophical ideas and persuading the reader's mind to accept them, and can lend new dimensions to the understanding of philosophers' texts and generate a different perspective on their discussions.

Citation: Asgharinaia, Ainaz (2025). A study of philosophy as literature from the perspective of Arthur Danto (a case study of Plato's "Phaidon"). *Modern Literary Studies*, 4(1) 69-93

Publisher: Association for the Promotion of Persian Language and Literature

© The Author(s).

DOI: [20.1001.1.28211413.1404.4.1.2.0](https://doi.org/10.28211413.1404.4.1.2.0)



Introduction

The relationship between philosophy and literature has predominantly been studied by examining philosophical themes within literary masterpieces. However, the inverse trajectory—analyzing philosophical treatises through literary forms and rhetorical devices—has frequently been overlooked. In his seminal essay “*Philosophy as/and/of Literature*” (1984), Arthur Danto argues that philosophers have historically engaged diverse literary genres (e.g., dialogues, aphorisms, letters, confessions), yet traditional scholarship often dismisses their literary form under the assumption that treating philosophy as literature undermines its pursuit of truth. Drawing on Hegelian aesthetics, Danto underscores that a text exists essentially for its audience, and disregarding literary mediation risks alienating the reader and rendering philosophical discourse paradoxically unreadable.

Within ancient Greek culture, poetry and dramatic literature functioned as powerful epistemic media shaping social consciousness. Plato, despite his explicit critique and exile of poets in the *Republic*, extensively utilized dramatic forms, dialectical setups, and aesthetic tropes. This study investigates the intersection of literary craftsmanship and philosophical argumentation in Plato’s *Phaedo*, examining why and how Plato employed the structural mechanics of classical Greek tragedy to articulate profound metaphysical doctrines, including the immortality of the soul, the epistemic limitations of the corporeal body, and the philosophical redefinition of death.

Method

This study employs a descriptive-analytical approach grounded in Arthur Danto’s theoretical framework of “philosophy as literature,” supplemented by Aristotle’s dramatic theory in the *Poetics* and Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogic theory.

The analysis investigates Plato’s *Phaedo* as a philosophical drama structured according to key Aristotelian tragic constituents:

١. **Plot (*Mythos*):** The trajectory of the narrative, the tragic flaw (*hamartia* / *hubris*), and the culmination in catharsis.
٢. **Character (*Ethos*):** The dramatic roles of Socrates (the tragic hero), Phaedo (the framed narrator), Crito (the loyal confidant), Simmias and Cebes (dialectical interlocutors), and the prison officer (the tragic messenger).
٣. **Diction (*Lexis*) and Thought (*Dianoia*):** The deployment of Socratic irony, dialogism, and multifaceted literary devices (metaphors, allegories, similes).

Through qualitative textual analysis, the paper examines how these literary elements operate synergistically with philosophical reasoning to persuade the reader and reconstruct classical Greek metaphysical assumptions.

Results

The analysis reveals several critical dimensions where literary form directly serves philosophical articulation in *Phaedo*:

١. **Tragic Plot and the Heroic Philosopher:**

Phaedo follows a classical tragic plot structure. Socrates is depicted not merely as a scholar but as a courageous, noble Athenian whose unwavering moral mission places him in direct conflict with civic orthodoxy. His unyielding philosophical interrogation—exhibiting a noble *hubris* akin to Sophocles' *Antigone*—leads inevitably to his political condemnation. The impending execution within the prison setting provides an emotionally charged dramatic arena, enabling Plato to stage the philosophical detachment from the sensory world.

٢. **Dramatic Characterization and Framed Narrative:**

By utilizing a third-person framed narrative (Phaedo recounting the final hours to Echecrates), Plato adopts the conventions of ancient epic/tragic storytelling, effectively removing himself as an omniscient author to avert direct political vulnerability while creating dramatic authenticity. Socrates is fashioned as an idealized tragic hero whose intellectual mastery and serene acceptance of

death overshadow the strict deductive limitations of his arguments regarding the soul's immortality.

۳. **Dialogism and Socratic Irony:**

Aligning with Bakhtinian dialogic concepts, Plato's dialogue mirrors living speech while structuring rigorous philosophical inquiry. Socratic irony serves as a dramatic engine: by feigning ignorance and destabilizing empirical definitions (e.g., the concept of equality in dialogue with Simmias), Socrates compels interlocutors into intellectual crisis (*aporia*), thereby preparing their consciousness for anamnesis (doctrine of recollection) and transcendental insight.

۴. **Metaphorical Tropes and Allegorical Imagery:**

Plato subverts traditional Greek mythological motifs through literary devices:

- **The Sunset:** Synchronizing Socrates' execution with the setting sun symbolizes the loss of intellectual illumination for Athens, contrasting darkness with the eternal light of Truth.
- **The Prison as Corporeal Metaphor:** The physical prison allegorizes the sensory body entrapping the immortal soul.
- **The Swan Song Simile:** Socrates likens himself to the prophetic swans of Apollo, reframing death not as a grim exile to Hades (as Homeric myths held), but as a joyous passage to transcendent wisdom.
- **The Offering to Asclepius:** The final request to sacrifice a rooster to Asclepius (god of medicine) metaphorically depicts mortal earthly existence as an illness from which death offers ultimate healing.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that in Plato's *Phaedo*, literary form is not an ornamental veneer but an indispensable cognitive instrument. Abstract rational proofs alone were insufficient to dismantle the deeply entrenched Greek perspective that glorified the corporeal body and feared the shadowy

afterlife of Hades. By recasting Socrates in the mold of a tragic hero and staging his discourse within a tragic paradigm, Plato harnessed the persuasive and emotional power of dramatic literature to effect an ontological and ethical shift in his audience.

Applying Arthur Danto's view confirms that divorcing literary structure from philosophical content deprives the text of its vitality and persuasive resonance. Plato's conscious fusion of philosophical inquiry (*logos*) and dramatic art (*mythos*) broadened the accessibility of his philosophy, ensuring its enduring aesthetic appeal, pedagogical efficacy, and hermeneutic longevity across millennia.