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A Salinger-ized Socrates

Jodi Geren

Blood red flares of contempt and antagonism, deep blues of *agon* and competition, hazy grays of silence and implication, and the eternal green of an epic dialogue contribute to the ironic, ambiguous, and often xenophobic portrait of a wartime Athens painted by Plato in the *Gorgias*. Without a definitive time frame, the characters of the dialogue assume a legendary status; heroic and nearly divine, they mythologize the Socratic conflict. In the *Gorgias*, Plato has created his own epic Achilles or Odysseus in Socrates, but he is a Socrates misplaced and isolated. In this ancient account of a contemporary gang fight, rhetoric is used as the cloak of proper conduct, ironically leaving the rhetorician silent and the anti-hero a professed, evangelistic, but incompetent communicator.

Plato opens the *Gorgias* with many characters in dialogue and conversation, focusing the first dialogue on Socrates and Gorgias. As the dialogue progresses, Socrates becomes increasingly biting and sarcastic toward the commentary given by Gorgias. As Socrates' attitude is insistent and relentless, the dialogue takes on the appearance of a harangue; Socrates, the questioner, gradually silences Gorgias, the famous rhetorician. With the exception of his interruption of the next dialogue between Socrates and Polus, Gorgias is silent, denied life in the remaining discussions of rhetoric and power. The irony presented by this silence is perhaps the most riveting aspect of Plato's work, and it seems that Plato has largely identified and given a red flag to the irony of the *Gorgias* by naming it for the silenced rhetorician. In this work focusing on language and the spoken word, ironies abound in the implications of what is left unsaid.

The main focus in the dialogue on what is not said, merely implied, seems to rest with those in opposition to Socrates—Polus, Chaerephon, and Callicles. Plato seems to skirt their definite oppositions, giving only an ambiguous idea that strife exists in the city-state. Arguments and disagreements range over flattery to rhetoric, yet in each discourse, Socrates is given the role of teacher, questioner, or dominator of the conversation. The remaining characters have little opportunity to explain themselves or challenge Socrates, with the exception of Callicles, thus making their positions hazy at best. It is at this point in the dialogue that Plato seems to encourage the audience to investigate the implied language of the character's ambiguity, rather than maintaining a focus on what is spoken. Plato reveals that as far as Socrates is concerned, much cannot be said simply because Socrates lacks the skills of communication.

A close and thorough examination of character silence and implication reveals antagonism and ambiguity on several levels. Most ambiguous throughout the dialogue, perhaps, is the questionable time frame. Plato gives no exact dates of when the work is occurring, and it is grossly out of place for the time it is suspected to have been written. This lends to the dialogue aspects of the timeless epic or saga. From the levels of competition and antagonism throughout the work, one may infer a setting of a wartime Athens, thus creating characters larger than human with incredible longevity. Not only does the ambiguous time frame affect the characters, but also the Socratic conflict and the contradictions present in the irony of Socrates. Socrates, the main speaker throughout the dialogue, is not a communicator. As the work progresses, he becomes more evidently an individual soul, a social outcast, and an incompetent politician grossly misplaced in a city-state so extremely focused on social good. Socrates' inability to interact socially is especially compounded as he is an

aristocrat, thus making him a member of the ruling class ideally most intent on the community. As in the silencing of Gorgias, Plato seems to be addressing the ironic nature of the dialogue, as well as creating a clear view of the battle between factions in strife-filled Athens. Plato manages to clash sophist with aristocrat throughout Callicles' argument and discussion with Socrates. It is in this final dialogue that previous disagreements compound, revealing the xenophobia and conflict present in the attitudes of the city-state.

With the aid of the ambiguous time frame, Plato is able to mythologize the Socratic conflict through Socrates in his direct clash with the sophistic characters in the dialogue. Plato takes Socrates through a near systematic sneering or silencing of each character, beginning with Gorgias and ending with Callicles. He compares Polus' logic and examples to that of a woman and cookery and, in the final phase of the dialogue, hardly leaves room for Callicles to respond to his last four speeches. Plato chooses to paint Socrates as the apparent victor with the final words of the dialogue, but also adds the irony that he seems to have lost his reason, compounded with the aspect that no one seems to agree with or understand him. This primary level of antagonism gives insight into the political situation of Athens, as well as illustrating the fear with which Socrates regards outsiders; primarily Polus, Gorgias, and Callicles. It is in his last speeches that Socrates becomes breathless and eager to prevail over Callicles, the foreigner, who seems to promote the well being of the city state in comparison to Socrates, the isolated aristocrat.

A second layer of antagonism functioning in the *Gorgias* goes beyond the political situation of Athens and into the social culture. Although many aspects of each realm overlap, Plato makes the social ramifications of political strife evident in the characters. It is in the examinations of the social climate of the society

that the parallel of a gang fight might be drawn. Plato establishes two main aspects in the dialogue that receive the most disagreement and cutting responses from each faction within the context of the work. Each are founded at the level of an ironic Socrates battling the remaining characters concerning the community vs. the individual, and the aristocrat vs. the sophist. Plato seems to found the argument of community and individual on two levels. Not only is Socrates discussing and arguing on his own against the community of characters, but he is essentially solitary in the larger picture of the city-state. Alienated with a capital sentence he insists on carrying out—much to the dismay of his fellow citizens—Socrates cements the idea of the individual soul in direct clash with the community. Plato continues this clash into the realm of the aristocrat and the sophist, again employing irony to distort any simple conclusions drawn by the reader. Socrates takes the role of aristocrat, loath to change or adopt the technical governing skills of the sophists. It becomes evident that Plato's use of irony rests with Socrates and Gorgias, the two characters who struggle with what cannot be said in this dialogue of rhetoric. Socrates, the aristocrat and leader by his birthright, cannot communicate or function socially, and Gorgias, the rhetorician, is allowed only silence and denied life throughout the work.

The final level of antagonism rests in the Greek emphasis on *agon*. Throughout the dialogue, the characters seem to compete for control of the discussion or for the satisfaction of attaining a contradiction from a specific line of questioning. As competition and prowess are aspects of the social culture within the city-state embedded deep within community life, Plato easily integrates *agon* with disagreements and main themes throughout the dialogue. However, he compounds the competition of the *Gorgias* with the uncertain time frame, and produces *agon* on

another universal, timeless level. In his construction of Socrates—the misplaced, isolated, heroic anti-hero through the boundless time frame—Plato has created an epic Achilles or Odysseus in the saga tradition. Socrates, however, in all of his isolation and irony, falls short of the epic hero standard. Certainly timeless and legendary, Socrates is no great hero in the footsteps of those before him. The result of this shortcoming is a disillusionment in the realization of change and continuous time. In Socrates, Plato has essentially created a modernist character in ancient Athens. With explanations dropping out of the world for Socrates, the individual aristocrat, he is easily compared to a modern character from Joyce or Faulkner, again enforcing the larger than human lasting power of this anti-hero without a definitive time frame.

Throughout the *Gorgias*, Plato returns to irony to color the characters in their plights of ambiguity and inability. Present in nearly every layer and language form operating within the work, irony is perhaps the greatest contributing factor to the modernist and timeless tone of the dialogue. Using this technique, Plato is able to layer antagonism, infer implication, and make every character seem slightly out of his element, thus provoking an awkward, but seemingly necessary situation. In order to create the shortcomings of the epic hero in Socrates, it seems that Plato needs to put his rival (of sorts) out of his comfort. Here, Plato chooses the sophist Gorgias; he silences the rhetorician within the opening pages and hands the dialogue of rhetoric to Socrates, thus proving him an incompetent communicator. Plato demonstrates that Gorgias' silence is necessary to expose the shortcomings of the timeless, epic, anti-hero: Socrates. The anti-hero, the alienated individual, the ancient Holden Caulfield...