The Gorgias Explained

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This essay will take a close look at Plato's *The Gorgias*; in particular, language use in the dialogue will be carefully examined. Subject matter and theme will be secondary to the structure and form. Five forms of language will be addressed, beginning with the narrative frame of the dialogue. The dialectical debates, and the numerous speeches the participants make will be discussed. Allusions to the body of literature of the time will be identified, and the important use of myth will be recognized. It will be also shown how these tools function together with the explicit theme of inaugurating Socrates as a mythic hero.

The narrative frame of *The Gorgias* provides a structure within which the debates are carried out. The opening two lines set the tone for the entire dialogue. There is an allusion to a proverbial phrase "first at a feast, last at a fight," and Callicles remarks that Socrates' arrival is the kind recommended for a battle, that is, he is late for a feast. The question that remains is, which is it, a feast or a fight? The very conflictual nature of the first two lines serves as a metaphor for itself, suggesting that this will indeed be a fight. I will argue exactly that. Callicles tells us that Gorgias has just finished putting on a demonstration, and has invited questions which he promises he will answer. The demonstration
is the feast, and the invitation for questions is a challenge to a
fight. Socrates is only too happy to oblige. There is the
indication that the party will go to Callicles’ house; however, it
seems that the five, Callicles, Gorgias, Polus, Socrates and side-
kick Chaerephon, carry out the discussion in the street.
Essentially what we have is a street fight. The frame of a street
fight is consistent with one theme of the dialogue, using
oratory to bring about righteousness, but inconsistent with the
theme of avoiding wrongdoing, yet essential in founding
Socrates as a warrior.

The form of the debates in the dialogue is classic Platonic
dialectic. The purpose of the dialectic is a means for
vanquishing Socrates' opponents. A primary speaker poses
questions to a second participant. The questions are sequential
and directive, seeking to define and clarify a concept. In
essence, language is used to describe itself. This inevitably
leads to perpetual definition, description, and clarification. It
could go on and on. The clandestine purpose of dialectic in
this dialogue is to bring about contradiction, shaming the
participants into defeat. Each participant learns the mistake of
the previous debate, but each is also unable to avoid a mutual
fate.

The debates can be broken up into four distinct, but
interrelated interactions. Not only, though, is there an increase
in the length of the matches, but also we see a heightening of
intensity over each of the four debates.

The first is a very short preliminary skirmish between
sidekick Chaerephon and Polus. Its purpose is only to set up
the Socrates-Gorgias match. The result of the first interaction
is the establishment of a rule in answering the questions, you
must be brief and to the point. Already an irony emerges:
there is no endpoint in a dialectic, it is impossible to give an
end-all definition. The notion of finer and finer clarity is an
illusion, there is no reduction to a lowest common
denominator. Indeed, how can you use words to define
words? Does it not follow that you must use words to clarify those words, and words to define those, and so-on, and so-on? In effect, the necessary conclusion is $\infty$, or undefined. The process of continuous definition is stopped only to suit (the desires of) Socrates. In questioning Gorgias, Socrates has complete control of the dialogue. He carefully orchestrates yes-no questions with questions that require a more elaborate answer. It is really Socrates who gives the definitions. Gorgias agrees at first to statements that make common sense. He continues to corroborate Socrates, despite his confounding definitions, only in the interest of maintaining consistency. One down.

Polus reenters the scene in protest. The first half of the sequence holds Polus as the interrogator, and Socrates as the subject. Socrates insists that Polus not make any speeches, then proceeds to embark on several himself. An inept inquisitor, Polus is unable to reverse a single statement made by Socrates. Socrates retakes the initiative and goes in for the kill. Polus puts up considerably more resistance than Gorgias, but is no more successful. In the end he too is ensnared in self-contradiction, and brought to shame. Two down.

The final debate is between Socrates and Callicles. Being keenly aware of the weapons Socrates used in defeating both Polus and Gorgias, Callicles proves harder to corner. When confronted with self-contradiction, he cleverly puts off the attack by shifting positions on a subject. This strategy is ineffective in countering Socrates. The dialectic is relentless, its power unstoppable. It becomes clear the discussion could go on forever. A weary Callicles, under the front of hurrying the argument to a close, concedes. Three down.

In connection with the dialectic, there is the use of unified discourses, or speeches. Marking a break from the question-answer cycle, the speech is directly concerned with the dialectic. It serves as an elaborate answer to a line of questioning. This is the case most of the time. Socrates
dictates early on that he shall be the only one allowed to make lengthy speeches. All the participants do make speeches, but only Callicles is permitted free rein on the use of speeches. The speech also serves as a means to make allusions, and mythopoeisms. Only Socrates and Callicles use speeches for this purpose. Participants often trade speeches in an effort to better the other, often resulting in a stand-off. A third purpose of the speech, and perhaps most important, is to introduce a new line of questioning, either to further the dialectic cycle, or to try a new flank when current attempts at conviction are failing. Socrates is the only one who uses the speech for this.

Concerning the allusions to the Greek corpus, their function in *The Gorgias* is two-fold. There is the explicit role of using them for reinforcing an opinion. Quoting a well-known poet or playwright adds muscle to a conviction. The covert, implicit action lies in the context of the quote, operating metaphorically. Structurally, the allusions and the frame have analogous relationships.

Callicles and Socrates are the only two participants who use allusions. Callicles cites Pindar concerning might making right. The irony in this allusion is this: who is the mighty one in this dialogue? Who is it that dominates the course of action so extensively that the others are left helpless? He also makes a very interesting allusion to Euripides. The context from which the quote was taken in *Antiope*, is a scene in which two brothers tell each other how to live life. This is precisely one of the outspoken topics between Callicles and Socrates. Socrates alludes to Euripides as well. His allusion lights upon the idea of not knowing death from life and life from death. This is an important allusion concerning the explicit material. The interpretation is not to pay attention to the explicit material, truth is a matter of opinion, and it is of very little importance.

Taken as truth, the function of mythopoeisis is the same as that of myth itself. Three functions of myth come to mind, to establish the origin of how things came to be, to operate as
paradigms for behavior, and to reconcile things intellectual logic fails to reconcile. All three of these functions are at work in the use of mythopoeisis in *The Gorgias*.

In a lengthy monologue at the end of the dialogue, Socrates indulges in the only mythopoeisis. At this point Callicles has long since given in, and Socrates’ continuation seems obsessive, but is critical to the goal of the dialogue. The myth itself is concerned with Socrates’ argument for righteous life. He cites Homer’s *Iliad* as well as Hesiod in support of his story. In Hesiod, the heroes of the Trojan War get to go to the Isles of the Blessed. Socrates relates that the righteous souls are sent to the Isles of the Blessed. Hence, warriors are righteous. In Homer, Tartarus is the prison-house of the Titans. In Socrates’ myth, the wicked are sent there. The previous debates were essential in establishing Socrates as the victorious warrior, and as righteous. His myth at the end of the dialogue implies that he will be the only one among the group to go to the Isles of the Blessed.

Thus we have Plato’s *Gorgias*. The careful use of structural language forms institutes Socrates as the mythic hero, complete with a paradigm, and an archetypal mythopoeisis. The narrative frame sets the scene of a street fight. Using dialectic debate, integral discourse, he systematically defeats his opponents. The themes he argues for establish a paradigm. With the help of cultural corpus allusion, he gives a mythopoeisis, firmly seating the image of Socrates as a mythic hero.
Works Cited