

**CLASSICAL GREECE
(4TH-5TH CENTURIES
BCE): PLATO:
ALLEGORY OF THE
CAVE**



CLASSICAL GREECE (4TH-5TH CENTURIES BCE): PLATO: ALLEGORY OF THE CAVE

Description

Through an in-depth analysis of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the story of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave", and using that knowledge will then theorize as to what message Plato (and Socrates) might be trying to give to humanity through the timeless dialogue.

Subjects

Philosophy, World History, Ancient History, European History

Grade Level

11-12

Duration

90 minutes

Tour Links

- Plato's Academy Ruins, Athens
- National Academy, Athens

Essential Questions

- Who was Plato? What is his life story?
- What was Plato's relationship to Socrates?
- Where does Plato fit into the story of Ancient Greek Philosophy?
- What is the story of the "Allegory of the Cave" from Plato's famous book, The Republic? What are the details behind the story itself?
- What is the meaning of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave"?
- Why is Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" still studied today, almost 2500 years after it was written?

Academic Summary

Socrates - GLAUCON

And now, I said, let me show in a figure how far our nature is enlightened or unenlightened: -- Behold! human beings living in a underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets.

From Plato, "Allegory of the Cave", book VII of The Republic, MIT Internet Classics Archive

Thus begins Book VII of Plato's most famous book, The Republic. Known generally as the "Allegory of the Cave" because of its images, Plato's story itself is fairly straight forward, although the archaic language can be hard for modern readers to follow. Images such as the ones below pepper the work, and at times take readers into an almost dream-like state. Like most of his works, Plato's Republic was written as a series of conversations between Socrates and different characters. In these conversations, the master (Socrates – Plato's teacher and mentor) uses images and stories to prove that human beings have little wisdom themselves, that society overall was corrupt, and that humanity needed a teacher/philosopher (such as Socrates) to show them the way to truth through the "light" of knowledge and understanding. In this specific dialogue, Socrates (Plato's main character) speaks with Glaucon, (who in real life happened to be Plato's older brother) about the nature of average human beings and how they perceive the world around them, the nature of "truth" and wisdom, and ultimately the rejection by most humans of that "truth", even when teachers (like Socrates and Plato) expose it to them.

Plato lived during a turbulent time in Ancient Greece. Over the course of his adulthood, he witnessed the collapse of democracy in Athens, then the rule by a tyrannical and violent oligarchy (led by members of Plato's own family), ultimately followed by the reestablishment of a democratic society that in 399 BC tried, convicted and executed his friend and mentor, Socrates, for corrupting the youth of Athens (including Plato). Plato was a student of Socrates, although not in the modern sense of the word. According to traditions written later about Socrates from his students (including Plato), Socrates was an old stonecutter who one day put down his tools and proceeded to spend the remainder of his life wandering the streets of Athens questioning people and trying to gather knowledge and wisdom. Unfortunately, in a somewhat eerie parallel to Jesus of Nazareth, no writings attributed to Socrates survive to the modern age. Historians aren't even sure that Socrates himself was literate. Everything we know about the great Athenian philosopher, his "wisdom", his travels, and his place in Athenian society, comes from later sources written by his disciples.

Along the way, the master (as Plato called Socrates) acquired a following of men hungry for that knowledge. According to multiple sources, Plato had been a poet and a writer before he joined Socrates. After Socrates was executed, Plato went on to write and publish stories about his mentor, and he later founded the “Academy”, western civilization’s first organized school, where he and others taught everything from philosophy and literature to science and mathematics.

Through an in-depth analysis of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the story of Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave”, and using that knowledge will then theorize as to what message Plato (and Socrates) might be trying to give to humanity through the timeless dialogue.

Objectives

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the basic story of Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” (Book VII of The Republic).
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the philosophical message of Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” (Book VII of The Republic).
3. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain why Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” (Book VII of The Republic) continues to be studied and debated almost 2500 years after it was written.

Procedure

I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: What is wisdom? How does one gain wisdom? Is it different than being smart? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed below. (5 min)

II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Brief Overview of Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” (20 min)
- Video – Plato’s Allegory of the Cave (15 min for both)
- Independent Activity – Students read the primary sources and articles about Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, taking notes as appropriate. (30 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles for homework the night before class to prepare for class discussion.
- Group Activity – Discussion on Plato’s allegory of the Cave, the message Plato was trying to give his readers and why the work is still studied today, 2500 years after it was written. (30 min)

III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail the story behind Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave”, Plato’s message that permeates the text, and why the work is still studied in the modern age, 2500 years after it was written.

Extension

On tour: Plato's Academy in Athens

While on tour, students can visit the ruins of Plato's Academy in the Acadimia Platonos area of Athens. Founded in 387 BCE by Plato in a grove of sacred olive trees dedicated to Athena, the goddess of wisdom, the Academy was the first institution dedicated to teaching critical thinking and higher learning in Western Civilization. At the school, Plato and others taught such varied subjects such as philosophy, literature, science and mathematics. According to tradition, Aristotle, who would go on to be a great philosopher, teacher and school leader in his own right, studied at the Academy for over 20 years. The academy had a long, but broken history (starting up a number of times over the next 800 or so years) until being shut down permanently by Byzantine emperor Justinian I in 529 CE because he feared it was a threat to Christianity. Admission to the archaeological site is free.

Web Links

Lesson Plan Websites

- classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.8.vii.html
“Allegory of the Cave”: The Republic, book VII by Plato (primary source) – translated by Benjamin Jowett – at the MIT Internet Classics Archive.
- faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/cave.htm
Allegory of the Cave (website) – analysis of Plato’s classic by S. Marc Cohen, Professor Emeritus in Philosophy from the University of Washington
- learning.hccs.edu/faculty/fred.gaines/math0312/tips-for-success/the-cave
An Analysis of Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” (website) – from Fred Gaines, Professor of Mathematics at Houston Community college (TX)
- vectors.umwblogs.org/2012/02/16/the-matrix-a-complex-modern-adaptation-of-platos-allegory-of-the-cave/
“The Matrix – A Complex, Modern Adaptation of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave” (article) – interesting article comparing the 1999 blockbuster movie The Matrix to Plato’s work. Recommended for students who need a connection between today and the past.
- depts.washington.edu/nwcenter/lessonsplansplatoallegory.html
Plato’s Allegory of the Cave and The Matrix. Suggests discussion questions for students comparing the two stories – good website for teachers looking to use both Plato and the 1999 movie.
- bachelorandmaster.com/creationofknowledge/allegory-of-the-cave.html
Allegory of the Cave (website)
- www.mesogeia.net/athens/places/platonacademy/platonacademy_en.html
Academy of Plato – website on the site of the Academy today
- kirkcenter.org/index.php/bookman/article/human-nature-allegory-and-truth-in-plato-republic/
“Human Nature, Allegory and Truth in Plato’s Republic” (website) – article by Pedro Gonzalez, Professor of Philosophy at Barry University (FL)
- www.reachteachers.com/plunkett/main/archives/tok/Allegory%20of%20Cave.ppt
“Plato’s Allegory of the Cave” (PowerPoint)
- sutterfield.weebly.com/uploads/1/2/6/8/12686139/discussion_questions_for_plato_cave.pdf
Discussion Questions on Plato’s Allegory of the Cave
- teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video) – great 2 minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA – highly recommended for teachers.
- youtube.com/watch?v=ryGPPc5Z5Ng
Plato and the Cave (video) – analysis of Plato’s work
- youtube.com/watch?v=69F7GhASOdM
The Cave: An Adaptation of Plato’s Allegory in Clay (video)

Background Information

- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plato
Plato – Wikipedia article
- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allegory_of_the_Cave
Allegory of the Cave – Wikipedia Article
- passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/greece/country_profile
On the Road: Greece (country profile) – from Passports Educational Travel

Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/ancient-greece-homer-iliad
Ancient Greece – Homer’s Iliad
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/ancient-greece-homer-odyssey
Ancient Greece – Homer’s Odyssey
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/ancient-greece-minoan-civilization
Ancient Greece – Minoan Civilization on Crete
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-alexander-the-great
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Alexander the Great
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-sparta
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Sparta
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-athens-democracy
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Athens
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-battle-of-marathon
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Battle of Marathon 490 BCE
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-battle-of-thermopylae
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Battle of Thermopylae: Leonidas and the 300
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/plato-allegory-of-the-cave
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Plato: Allegory of the Cave
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-plato-euthyphro
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Plato: Euthyphro
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/plato-republic-philosopher-kings
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Plato: Philosopher Kings and the Republic
- www.passports.com/lesson_plans/greece/classical-greece-socrates
Classical Greece (4th/5th Centuries BCE) – Socrates: Father of Western Philosophy

Key Terms

- Allegory
- Plato
- Platonic
- Philosophy
- Socrates
- True Forms
- Wisdom

