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# **‘Drink and Become a Legend’: Reading the Alternate History in Frank Higgins’ *The True Death of Socrates*<sup>(\*)</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

This paper deals with Frank Higgins’ alternate history play *The True Death of Socrates* (2013) in terms of history. Higgins poses a hypothetical question to test “What-if” the historical course of Socrates’ execution in 399 B.C. turned out differently and Socrates escaped death. It will be interesting to investigate how Higgins’ philosophical farce integrates history with alternate history, and, how, at a certain point, the incidents deviate from reality. The question the research raises is how Higgins formulated an alternate history for real history to discuss the hypothesis of ‘what-if’ Socrates as a moral philosopher does not behave with dignity in the moral sense. This paper seeks to show how the Alternate History approach that is introduced in Gavriel D. Rosenfeld’s *The World Hitler Never Made: Alternate History and the Memory of Nazism* (2005) and Kathleen Singles’ *Alternate History: Playing with Contingency and Necessity*. (2013) as a deviation from the actual narrative of history, corresponds to Frank Higgins’ approach to his farcical play *The True Death of Socrates*. The study has two primary goals: on the one hand, it investigates the term Alternate History as a key concept presented by Gavriel D. Rosenfeld and Kathleen Singles. On the other hand, it attempts to delineate the features of alternate history through employing such features in Higgins’ play.

**Keywords:** Alternate History – Frank Higgins - *The True Death of Socrates*

## 'تجرّع السم لتصبح أسطورة': قراءة التاريخ البديل في مسرحية فرانك هيجنز "موت سقراط الحقيقي"

### مستخلص البحث

تتناول هذه الدراسة المسرحية الهزلية "موت سقراط الحقيقي" للكاتب الأمريكي فرانك هيجنز التي نشرت عام (٢٠١٣)، وعرضت على مسرح برودواي في نيويورك باعتبارها تخيل تاريخ بديل. يطرح الكاتب تساؤل افتراضي "ماذا لو" أن الحدث التاريخي لمحاكمة سقراط وإعدامه عام ٣٩٩ قبل الميلاد انتهى بشكل مختلف ونجا سقراط من الموت؟ يتساءل هيجنز بدوره كيف سيختلف التاريخ لو لم يتجرّع الفيلسوف اليوناني سقراط سم الشكران في السجن عام ٣٩٩ قبل الميلاد واستطاع أن ينجو من محبسه؟ تقدم المسرحية مسارًا تاريخيًا بديلاً لسجن سقراط بعد أن خطأ المجتمع "سقراط" واتهمه بإفساد عقول الشباب وحمل حكومة أثينا على محاكمته والحكم بإعدامه. يستقر هيجنز التاريخ فيروي أحداث هزلية مغايرة للواقع التاريخي الذي يعرف القارئ المطلع أنه صحيح. أعاد هيجنز تصوير الأحداث التاريخية بصورة كاريكاتيرية ل طرح أسئلة فلسفية حول الصراع بين الحياة والموت. إن الأشكالية التي يحاول البحث أن يطرحها للدراسة والتحليل هي كيف صاغ هيجنز تاريخاً بديلاً من خلال تاريخ حقيقي لمناقشة فكرة المبادئ الأخلاقية مقابل المبادئ غير الأخلاقية والموت البطولي من وجهة نظر بلاتو. يقوم البحث على تطبيق المنهج التاريخي على مسرحية فرانك هيجنز "موت سقراط الحقيقي" في صورة هزلية معتمداً على السخرية السقراطية وهو المنهج الأنسب لأظهار صراع سقراط الداخلي والخارجي الذي انتهى بموت بلاتو متجاوزاً التاريخ لتقديم صورة مناقضة للواقع التاريخي. للدراسة هدفين رئيسيين يحاول الباحث خلالهما أن يقدم أولاً: سرداً تاريخياً حقيقياً لسجن سقراط عام ٣٩٩ قبل الميلاد، حيث يتبع الباحث المنهج التاريخي بالتركيز على هذه الفترة التاريخية الحقيقية، كما يحاول الباحث من ناحية أخرى شرح مفهوم التاريخ البديل من خلال تطبيقه على مسرحية فرانك هيجنز "موت سقراط الحقيقي".

### كلمات مفتاحية:

التاريخ البديل - فرانك هيجنز - مسرحية "موت سقراط الحقيقي"

We are doomed historically to history.

Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of the Clinic*, xvi.

The Good Man Desires, Not a Long, But a Virtuous Life.

Jowett, *The Gorgias: The Dialogues of Plato*, p. 301.

The present paper questions ‘What-if’ things occurred otherwise and history unfolded differently in Frank Higgins’<sup>(1)</sup> philosophical farce *The True Death of Socrates* (2013). The main premise upon which the study is based examines how Higgins twists history, and presents a warped comic scenario that is different from reality. The study attempts to investigate how the Alternate History approach as introduced in Gavriel D. Rosenfeld’s *The World Hitler Never Made: Alternate History and the Memory of Nazism* (2005) and Kathleen Singles’ *Alternate History: Playing with Contingency and Necessity*. (2013) matches with Frank Higgins’ approach to his farcical play *The True Death of Socrates*. Higgins blends a real past with an alternative representation to color the events of the play with ideas that engage the reader in the action, as he hypothesizes, “‘Wouldn’t it be funny if Socrates didn’t really die a heroic death but tried to escape?’” (Higgins, Frank. Tuesday, April 11, 10.08 PM, 2023.). Higgins, in this sense, does not negate the existence of a real history, but rather, contemplates an imagined scenario that challenges the reader’s knowledge of a real past. The reader pursues how the past is portrayed like a nightmare to understand the vices of the present scenario. In this view, the whole burden falls on the knowledgeable reader to identify the discrepancy between the real history and its alternate counterpart.

Higgins’ philosophical farce is an alternate biography of Socrates, chronicling his imprisonment in 399 B.C.E that unexpectedly concludes with Plato’s death. Higgins caricatures Socrates as a master in prison anguished by his approaching death, and frustrated by the persistent longing for life amid the failing effort of his disciple Plato to convince him to drink the hemlock to die a heroic death. The dialogue presented in the play is fraught with humor to question ‘What-if’ the historical course of Socrates’s execution

turned out differently and Socrates escaped death? Examining such hypothesis invites the reader to travel backwards through time to 399 B.C., to relive the real history, and to engage with the actors onstage and share Socrates' feeling of imprisonment. The subjunctive conditional 'if' engages the audiences in the action by the speculation evoked, as it moves the reader's imagination to imagine an alternate scenario that stretches beyond reality to assume alternative outcomes. In his article, *The Evolution of Imagination and Fiction through Generativity and Narrative*, Valerie van Mulukom defines imagination as "a very broad cognitive ability, encompassing a capacity for stimulation, symbolic processing, metathought, thinking about different times, places, and minds, among other things" (Carroll & Clasen, p. 53). Higgins has created an imaginary history that deviates from reality, and shifts the audiences' imagination to an alternate history. In this view, Higgins offers an imaginative window for the audiences to imagine a fictional world that departs from a known history.

The present study seeks to answer the following questions: Who is the real philosopher Socrates? What is the meaning of the term Alternate History according to Gavriel D. Rosenfeld and Kathleen Singes, and how is it functioned in dramatizing the play? How the features of Singes' theory including the point of divergence and the illusion of authenticity are actualized in the play? What is the 'true' historical timeline as represented in the play and its counterfactual timeline? How does Higgins conceptualize alternate history in a real history, or what is the point of divergence that Higgins created to separate the alternate history from the real history? Is Higgins' play merely a hypothetical comic scenario of an imaginary history? And how does Higgins portray Socrates in such a counterfactual representation? What is the significance of such alternative depiction of Socrates? Does the speculative ending of the play bring consolation?

This paper examines Higgins' alternate history play *The True Death of Socrates* in terms of history relying on Kathleen Singes' methodology as introduced in her seminal book *Alternate History:*

*Playing with Contingency and Necessity* (2013). Following Singles' methodology, the study explores the function of Alternate History in Higgins' play, and the role of the knowledgeable reader to understand the timeline in which history deviates from reality as Singles terms it "the point of divergence" (Singles, *Alternate History*, p. 7). Singles' theory differs from all the previous theories of Alternate History including Rosenfeld's theory because Single concerns with revealing how

Alternate histories reflect the postmodern tension between artificiality and authenticity, but they do not deny the existence of a real past, nor do they deny the validity of a normalized narrative of the real past. Rather than challenge our notions of history, or call into question our ability to know the past through narrative, they conservatively support the normalized narrative of the real past (Singles, *Alternate History*, p. 7).

For Singles, the alternate history scenario can be understood only when the audiences detect a historical contradiction dramatized on stage that deviates from the normalized timeline of reality. Alternate history, in this sense, addresses the recipient's role to perceive a point of divergence and an illusion of authenticity. It is the informed reader who uses his/her knowledge to perceive this historical deviation. He/she compares the actual history with the alternate one. The informed reader perceives the illusion of authentic elements that are manifested in Higgins' play because the protagonists share the same names with the real philosophers; Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. In addition, time, place, and the cause of Socrates' indictment in correspondence with the date of Socrates' Trial and Death in 399 B.C.E. are the core elements around which the whole play revolves. The informed reader infers the true events in Higgins' play, as he understands when the events deviate from the normalized narrative of the real past.

Higgins' alternate history play incorporates history with philosophy to refer to the political conflict of Socrates with democratic Athens that led to one of the most famous executions in

Western history. These historical events represent the background history against which Higgins builds his alternate history play. Alternate history, in this view, is not a record of historical reality at all, though it is grounded in part on facts as indicated by Kathleen Singles in her introduction to *Alternate History: Playing with Contingency and Necessity*:

Alternate history features a specific kind of deviation from historical record—what I am calling here the point of divergence: the moment in the narrative of the real past from which the alternative narrative of history runs a different course. The point of divergence is the common denominator and the trait that distinguishes alternate histories from other related genres (Singles, *Alternate History*, p. 7).

For Singles, alternate history authorizes a freedom of creation to perceive a divergence that results from the nonoccurrence of historical events. In addition, Singles expounds that alternate history does not mirror history, but rather, it is “entirely functioned as a narrative explicitly, at an identifiable point, permanently contradicts the normalized narrative of the real past” (Singles, *Alternate History*, p. 75). According to Singles’ definition of alternate history, the alternative representation of the past has a swing and a divergence in the timeline of Higgins’ play that leads to different outcomes from reality. Higgins presents a point of divergence in his play that challenges the reader’s knowledge of history. This point of divergence begins with Socrates’ refusal to drink the poison that Plato carried to him to die a heroic death. In an argument between Socrates and Plato, we read:

**Plato:** ... What matters is a noble death. People need you to die in a way that is *meaningful*.

**Socrates:** Why? Let’s question that assumption over wine.

**Plato:** No, I’ll prove that life has meaning in the book I write. The book about your heroic death. You’ll inspire people for all time.

**Socrates:** Sounds good. Let's drink a toast.

**Plato:** No. You must drink *this* wine. Drink and become a legend.

**Socrates:** No thank you.

**Plato:** Doofus, help me to convince Socrates to die a great death?  
(Higgins, Demastes (ed.), p. 8)

According to the above quotation, Plato invites Socrates to act willingly and voluntarily for a greater benefit and happiness to become a legend, and to “secure a position of fame and respect for oneself and one's family, a good reputation which will persist after one's death. Nothing else can matter so much” (Adkins, 1960, p. 155). This Platonic view is a way to convince Socrates with the apparent good. After a long argument between Socrates and Plato, the latter fails to convince the former with his viewpoint to recognize the virtue of a heroic death, and to achieve the ultimate good from Plato's opinion. The incidents of the play turned out differently at the end of the play, when Socrates poisoned Plato and posed himself as Plato. With this end, the reader becomes aware that Higgins presents not a possible reality, but an absurd scenario that diverges from the real history. In the real history, Socrates willingly died in prison, though his disciple Crito urged Socrates to escape from prison to save his life because his opponents wanted to ruin him, and “surrender would delight his enemies” (Grube, *Plato's Crito*, p. 155).

Through a survey of the previous literature on alternate history, different studies have contributed to the understanding of this literary genre. Many attempts have investigated alternate history noticeably in fiction, but rare studies are remarkably concerned with exploring alternate history either in the British or in the American theatre. My contribution is to employ Singles' theory of Alternate History (2013) specifically on Frank Higgins' farcical play *The True Death of Socrates* because it is the most recent model according to Carver (Carver, p. 14). In *Alternate Histories and Nineteenth-Century Literature* (2017), Ben Carver argues that Singles' theory, unlike all the previous alternate history theories, invites the reader to “infer a normative view of the *true* history from which imaginary narratives



depart” (Carver, p. 14). Carver denotes that Singles’ approach is conservative towards the *true* history, and focuses on how alternate history turns out differently. The major contribution of Singles “is the point of divergence....and the realization of the role of the reader, or the particular challenge posed to the reader of distinguishing between history and its alternative version” (Singles, *Alternate History*, pp. 279-280). Hence, Singles leaves it entirely to the reader to guess the connection between history and alternate history.

In Kathleen Singles’ article (2011), *‘What-if’ and Beyond: Counterfactual History in literature*, Singles argues that “Rosenfeld’s *The World Hitler Never Made* is more ambitious than most other studies in this respect, explicitly setting out to compare British, American, and German alternate histories of the Second World War” (Singles, *‘What if?’ and Beyond*, p. 183). In *21<sup>st</sup> Century US Historical Fiction: Contemporary Responses to the Past* (2020), Ruth Maxey points out that Singles’ theory (2013) “does indeed have important consequences for the investigation of alternate history ” because it differs from all the previous studies that are concerned with revealing the relationship between postmodern theories of history and alternate history (Maxey, p. 231). Maxey states that Singles’ theory provides a detailed overview of understanding history arguing that “to recognize these narratives as alternate histories in the first place, we need to be aware of the normalized narrative of the real past” (Maxey, p. 231). In *Running and Clicking* (2013), Sabine Schenk makes emphasis on Singles’ idea about the historical knowledge of the reader and his/her collective memory to understand the point of divergence, namely, “the bifurcation in a forking-paths between history and alternate history to elicit what is not directly expressed” (Schenk, p. 30).

There are no previous studies on Frank Higgins’ *The True Death of Socrates*, and it has not been critically studied since its publication in (2013). Specifically, no one has explored the play from Rosenfeld’s and Singles’ models of alternate history. In addition, no playwright has wrestled with the play’s hypothesis encapsulated in Higgins’ statement: “if what Socrates stands for ‘dies’ in that he

doesn't live up to his teachings about honor; when things get close to the end he'd rather do anything to live—even kill someone—than to die with dignity” (Higgins, Frank. Wed. 12, April, 2.26 AM, 2023.). With this alternate scenario, Higgins presents a world that is contrary to the known history. The point of divergence in the play is the gap between the real history and the alternate scenario that has not been examined before. The main focus of the study is to contemplate what would have happened had certain events turned out differently. The hypothetical question upon which the play is built was never stated before, and was hardly ever discussed by prior playwrights. However, it deeply provokes, in a sense, a kind of historical uncertainty. In the foreword of *Three Tips in Time and Space* (2020), Robert Silverberg asks a speculative question, “If all things are possible, if all gates stand open, what sort of world we will have?” (p. 6). In accordance, Higgins expresses his vision:

I started *The True Death of Socrates* with the idea that ‘wouldn't it be funny if Socrates didn't really die a heroic death but tried to escape?’ As I worked on the play a larger meaning started to reveal itself to me: how do we know things? We think we know history, but what can we really be sure of? Historians tell us what happened, and perhaps why things happened. But is the real story as heroic as history tells us? What is the kind of story that Plato thinks the public needs to believe in? And why is it so upsetting to Plato that Socrates is not living up to the way Plato wants history to be? (Higgins, Frank. Tuesday, April 11, 10.08 PM, 2023).

As elucidated in the above quotation, these questions are raised by Frank Higgins while working on the play. Higgins steps beyond reality to highlight a philosophical question that has perplexed many thinkers for centuries: ‘What-if’ all things are open to questioning and interpretation even history, and nothing can be taken for sure. Higgins, in turn, wonders ‘what-if’ the Greek philosopher, Socrates, did not sip the hemlock and succeeded to smuggle out of prison and Plato was poisoned instead. Higgins, as a contemporary humorist playwright, suggests that if we read certain historical events

differently, we would definitely get a different interpretation of past events. So different representations of history yield in different interpretations of past events. Our knowledge of history is taken from the background information provided by historians, and the records of the witnesses. Therefore, our knowledge of history is transmitted over time “from one generation of historians to the other” (Tucker, p. 21). Alternate history is understood by reading the real history that is presented by the historians as a way to explore the implicit lessons of history. In *Radical Changes: Alternative History in Modern British Drama* (1991), Peacock writes, “Our age, like every age, needs to reinterpret the past as part of learning to understand itself, so that we can know what we are and what we should do” (p. 1). Higgins presents a nightmare scenario that deviates from the known reality to direct the readers’ imagination to perceive what is beyond reality. The implicit purpose of this warped representation of a real past is to challenge the audiences’ knowledge of history, and to elicit a moral inference of interpreting the past. In his seminal essay *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1952), Carl Marx writes, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx, p. 5).

### **The True History of Socrates**

Socrates (469 BCE – 399 BCE), a Greek rhetoric philosopher, is celebrated as “the vortex and turning-point of so-called world history” (Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 74). Socrates shapes the history of Western philosophy with his moral ethics that paves the way for modern culture as indicated by Nietzsche, “modern culture arises in the mid-fifth-century Athens with Socrates” (p. xvi). Socrates is the first moral philosopher who introduces the peripatetic school as he wanders in the streets of Athens to teach the masses who listen to him “without charging a fee but even glad to reward anyone who was willing to listen” (Crube, *Plato: The Trial and Death of Socrates*, p. 12). Socrates’ lessons in the streets of Athens, and his willingness to give his knowledge without receiving money in return make his fame

and equally threaten the Athenian elites. He does not aspire for money, attention or even appreciation, but rather, he believes that it is improper to be rewarded for the transmission of wisdom. In *Lessons of the Master*, George Steiner argues, “If the Master is truly a bearer and communicator of life-enhancing truths, a being inspired by vision and vocation of no ordinary sort, how is it possible for him to present a bill?” (p. 15).

Socrates’ philosophy relies on oratory using a face-to-face argument in the form of questions that aim to reach the truth and “know yourself!” (Breen, p. 7). Socrates aims to confer Knowledge through dialectic; the give-and-take of argument in an attempt to realize wisdom as indicated by Aristotle, “Socrates was the first to be concerned about proper definitions and so inaugurated logic, and was also the first to ask philosophical questions about ethics and not just physics” (Garver, p. 22). Hence, the roots of the Socratic argument are conveyed in the form of questions and answers as an implied quest to erase ignorance and to create enlightenment to a wider public. Socrates always searches for knowledge and truth in common opinions. For Socrates, knowledge helps to understand life as it is a step to know yourself. In *A History of Western Philosophy* (1967), Bertrand Russell argues, “Socrates always pretends that he is always eliciting knowledge already possessed by the man he is questioning” (p. 92). For Russell, Socrates poses questions to encourage his students to search for proper answers, because he believes that questions improve thinking to generate knowledge, and to awaken the mind. Socrates always begins and ends his discussion in questions, because he believes that his vital role as a master is to ask questions that need answers to move his disciple’s imagination as indicated by Gary Day in *Literary Criticism: A New History* (2008), “The master, like the literary work, never leaves us with an answer but with a question, a conjecture, a tremor in the soul” (p. 13). Socrates’ methodology is to teach the art of thinking and speaking to exchange ideas. He used to share ideas with his students to convince them and to benefit from them. In *The Art of Persuasion* (1963), George Kennedy writes,

Socrates apparently taught that truth was absolute and knowable, and that a clear distinction should be made between dialectic, the question and answer method of obtaining the one correct answer, and rhetoric, which does not seem interested in the universal validity of the answer but only in its persuasiveness for the moment (p. 14).

Socrates' method of teaching relies on persuasion and exchanging ideas to acquire knowledge. Socrates believes that knowledge is power. His contemporaries and successors are inspired by him as indicated by Hegel, "Socrates is arguably a pivotal figure in the tide of world history, a Janus God with two faces, one surveying the past and the other facing the future" (Cohen, p. 5). His method of teaching established the Socratic Dialogue literary genre<sup>(2)</sup>. Yet, his opposing ideas condemned him, making his philosophy almost impossible, a state known as the Socratic Problem<sup>(3)</sup>.

The canonized history of Socrates' Trial and Death in 399 B.C.E is part of a historical knowledge that is still living with us in the present to denote that "history is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past" (Carr, *What is History?*, p. 30). The Athenian Senate members condemned Socrates to death to stop philosophizing as indicated by Plato in *The Phaedo*, "Socrates is an idol, a master-figure for philosophy, a teacher condemned for his teachings as a heretic" (Cohen, p. 5). Plato attributes the cause of Socrates' execution to the political prejudice that leads to such indictment, because Socrates is accused of impiety for his misguided teachings. Socrates is sentenced to death by 501 Athenian juries who agreed that he is "guilty of corrupting the young and of not believing in the gods in whom the city believes" (Grube, *Plato: Apology*, p. 28). Socrates, in despair, accepts the death penalty that is handed down against him as indicated in *The Apology*, "The jury now gives its verdict of guilty, and Meletus asks for the penalty of death" (Grube, p. 39). In prison, Socrates expressed his sorrow for living in a democratic community, driven by imperfect beliefs that convicted and executed one of its

knowledgeable thinkers and reputed philosophers. In *The Republic*, Plato's Socrates says, "Philosophers are not honored in our cities" (*Plato The Republic*: book VI, (1985). p. 179). Before his execution, Socrates expresses his anger for the triumph of evil saying, "Nothing in all of nature can be found to match the cruelty with which society treats its best men" (*Plato The Republic*: book VI, p. 178).

Socrates faces the death sentence with courage, because he is aware that "nothing can harm a good man either in life or after death" (Tarrant, *The Apology*, p. 67). Yet, Socrates places his duty to the State before his duty to his family, because he wants to lay down the principles that should guide people in life. He is willing "to stand by his principles and serve as a role model to the young, even if this meant death" (Irvine, p. 16). Socrates' acceptance of the death sentence after his conviction of impiety by the Greek Senate members is an example of courage that supports his philosophical attitude. Yet his disciple, Crito, regards Socrates' political loyalty to the State as a wrong behaviour, because by accepting death, Socrates is not being just as he is abandoning his children and this entails harm.

Accordingly, Crito appeals, in vain, for his master to think of his children and disciples, because one owes a duty to himself, his family and his students as well as to the State. Crito claims that it is wrong for Socrates to choose the more indolent course and to die because death requires less courage than life. Crito, in this sense, sees that Socrates' defense is meaningless unless he regards it as important to live. In response to his anger at the injustice of the Athenians juries, Socrates questions his disciple Crito to elucidate essential issues that have preoccupied him along his stay in prison about the idea of justice. Socrates states that the good opinions are those of the wise that should be followed, and the bad are the opinions of the foolish that should be neglected, and the wise man knows how to differentiate between the two opinions. Socrates also questions his friend Hippias that we should only consider the opinions of the wise who have knowledge. Socrates says,

**Socrates:** If justice be power as well as knowledge—then will not the soul which has both knowledge and power be the more just, and that which is the more ignorant be the more unjust? Must it not be so?

**Hippias:** Clearly.

(Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato*, 1937, pp. 728-729)

For Socrates, democracy is a value that should be offered for the educated, and not to be permitted to a majority of uneducated population, because the voters of the Greek Senate members were uneducated and they played a negative role in the trial. Socrates adds that the voters need to have power and knowledge to direct Man's actions. (Jowett, p. 728).

In accordance, Socrates is destined to take a brave decision and to choose between life and death. He finds salvation in death and a relief from life's troubles so Plato's Socrates says, "I am quite clear that the time had come when it was better for me to die and be released from my distractions" (Tarrant, *The Apology*, p. 67). Socrates endures many troubles and wants to end his suffering. He asks the jury for a favor before his execution to educate his sons as he tries to educate the Athenians, and to punish his sons if they care about riches rather than virtues as indicated by Socrates in *The Apology*, "When my sons grow up, gentlemen, if you think that they are putting money or anything else before goodness, take your revenge by plaguing them as I plagued you. If you do this, I shall have had justice at your hands – I and my children" (Tarrant, *Plato's Apology*, p. 67). Socrates' closing speech before he sips the hemlock in prison historicizes a precarious time in his life that reflects his absolute idealism in a non-idealist society, and his patience and courage.

To overcome his melancholy on the day of his execution and to relieve the pain of his friends, Socrates says, "Cheer up! This is not the end of me. I am going from here to a better place" (Bostock, *Plato's Phaedo* p. 39). Socrates means that a philosopher would prefer death to get rid of the earthly troubles and pains. Socrates is conscious that since he bears no hatred to those who accused him, so no evil can

happen to him either in life or in death. He does not fear death, because he “finds eternity in this life day by day, and he does not need to wait for physical death to die the philosopher’s death, to turn away from the pleasures of the delights of thinking” (Bostock, p. 20). Socrates, in this sense, believes that if he faces death, there will be an afterlife, because the soul is immortal and survives after the death of the body. The point of Socrates, here, is that the parting of the soul from the body does not mean the death of the soul, because the soul is imprisoned inside the body while man is alive. With death, the soul will be released from the prison of the body when it is separated from it and transcends to another place. For Socrates, death may be a blessing because the soul is liberated but it is not “destroyed” (Bostock, p. 22). Socrates is conscious that life is a cycle of death and rebirth that continues forever. Socrates, in turn, utters these words before he sips the cup in one draught,

**Socrates:** I suppose I am allowed, or rather bound, to pray the gods that my removal from this world to the other may be prosperous. This is my prayer, then; and I hope that it may be granted.... Really, my friends, what a way to behave! ... Calm yourselves and be brave. (Tarrant, *Plato’s Phaedo*, p. 184).

In this regard, Socrates dies in peace as he asks his friends to have patience. He makes his choice to die a heroic death, because he is convinced that he owes much to the Athenian State, namely, he has received benefits from the laws of Athens, “birth, nurture and education” (Grube, *Plato’s Crito*, p. 54).

### **The Master-Disciple Relationship**

Needless to say, Plato is Socrates’ disciple and Aristotle is Plato’s, and the nature of this relation is an important feature in dramatizing the master-disciple relationship between them. This unique master-disciple relationship, from Socrates to Plato and from



Plato to Aristotle, is irreplaceable and has its benefit for both Plato and Aristotle as indicated by John Stuart Mill in his seminal book, *On Liberty* (1864), “Socrates is the head and prototype of all subsequent teachers of virtue, the source equally of the lofty inspiration of Plato and the judicious utilitarianism of Aristotle, the two headsprings of ethical as of all other philosophy” (p. 46). Hence, Plato is unable to overcome his resentment of what has happened to his teacher, and his dialogues come as “both a defense of his beloved teacher and an indictment of democratic Athens” (Holway, p. 561). Plato respects and honors his master Socrates for the interest that he shows in educating him as indicated by Eugene Garver in *Aristotle’s Rhetoric: An Art of Character* (1994), “Students are attracted by teachers who give the impression that they care about them, and they feel they are learning a lot of such teachers” (p. 11). Plato is fascinated by his teacher Socrates for his knowledge and for the talents he mastered. Socrates, in turn, respects his disciple Plato for his willingness to learn. In *The master-Disciple Relationship*, Huston Smith argues,

The master does not enjoy the disciple’s esteem because he conveys something that is useful in any utilitarian respect. Nor is it a distinguishable attribute of his total self that he seeks to transfer to the disciple—to repeat, a specifiable skill or body of knowledge. What is significant for the disciple is the master’s total self, whose character and activity are unique and irreplaceable (Nasr & O’Brien (2006), *The Essential Sophia*, p. 149).

Plato inherits the dialectical method<sup>(4)</sup> from his master Socrates, and in turn, practices it with his student Aristotle as indicated by Gary Day in his seminal book *Literary Criticism: A New History* (2008), “Plato preserves the spirit of Socrates in his dialogues but Aristotle writes in continuous prose” (p. 13). The dialectic argument employed by Socrates paves the way for Plato’s argumentative method and the logic of Aristotle to master knowledge.

### **Understanding Alternate History**

Gavriel D. Rosenfeld and Kathleen Singles suggest that ‘alternate history’ is a genre of speculative literature that offers both the writer and the reader an access to fantasies that exceed reality and replace real events. The term alternate history generally entails ‘What-if’ tales of history that shift the recipient’s interest from a real past to an imaginary world. In *Brave New Words: The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction* (2006), Jeff Prucher defines ‘alternate history’ as, “a timeline that is different from that of our own world, usually extrapolated from the change of a single event; the genre of fiction set in such a time” (p. 4). Prucher points out that ‘alternate history’ is a historical event that is different from the actual reality, generally inferred as a deviation from history. There is a relation between the point of divergence in the text and the response of the reader because “alternate histories, as texts which rely on text-external knowledge, make specific demands on the reader” (Singles, p. 8).

The origin of alternate history dates back to the Greeks in 490 B.C.E. as indicated by Gavriel D. Rosenfeld in his introduction to *The World Hitler Never Made: Alternate History and the Memory of Nazism* (2005). Rosenfeld argues that,

Alternate history is an age-old phenomenon. Indeed, it traces its roots back to the origins of Western historiography itself. No less a figure than the Greek historian Herodotus speculated about the possible consequences of the Persians defeating the Greeks at Marathon in the year 490 B.C.E., while the Roman historian Livy wondered how the Roman empire would have fared against the armies of Alexander the Great. Ever since antiquity, the posing of counterfactual questions has constituted an implicit, if under acknowledged component of historical thought, helping historians establish casual connections and draw moral conclusions in interpreting the past. As a result, alternate history slowly migrated to the field of imaginative literature. (p. 5).

Alternate history gained a noticeable recognition for readers in speculative fiction since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, it accomplished more prominence in the 1960s. Nonetheless, alternate history flourished in the American theatre after the Second World War. Creating an alternate history with a speculative scenario relies on the author's view of the present, as it invites the audiences to imagine an alternate historical scene different from reality, and to assess the stage incidents from a speculative view. Gavriel D. Rosenfeld adds in his introduction to *The World Hitler Never Made: Alternate History and the Memory of Nazism* (2005),

Alternate histories explore the past less for its own sake than to utilize it instrumentally to comment upon the state of the contemporary world. Alternate histories typically come in the form of both fantasy and nightmare scenarios. Fantasy scenarios envision the alternate past as superior to the real present and thereby typically express a sense of dissatisfaction with the way things are today. Nightmare scenarios, by contrast, depict the alternate past as inferior to the real past and thus articulate a sense of contentment with the contemporary status quo (pp. 10-11).

For Rosenfeld, alternate history may appear either as fantasy or nightmare scenarios. Fantasy scenarios portray the past in a positive way, and the reader, in turn, covertly desires for changing the present. Conversely, nightmare scenarios portray the past in negative terms to confirm the present and, therefore, rejects any desire for alteration. Hence, nightmare scenarios, in this sense, are portrayed to validate the present. Rosenfeld argues that beneath that deformed history lies another true history, one more faithful that invites the informed reader to think. Kathleen Singles agrees with Gavriel D. Rosenfeld as she suggests that, "History' in alternate history, as historical fiction, may be defined as a construct of the text, but one which also refers to and engages with a normalized narrative of the real past" (Singles, *Alternate History*, p. 48). For Singles, alternate history pushes beyond

the boundaries of history to assume alternate outcomes. Thus, alternate history “comprises narratives set in worlds whose histories run contrary to the history of our actual world” (Raghunathin, p. 1). Alternate History “either recreates the past or changes the course of history as seen in the speculative writing of alternate history, also called “allohistory” (literally “other history”), that are not entirely fictional or counterfactual” (Liao, p. 8). In *The Alternate History: Refiguring Historical Time*, Karen Hellekson (2001) argues that,

Alternate Histories take a historical base, accurate in our world, synthesized from eyewitness accounts, letters, and other primary sources, and historical repercussions of the event (war, peace, an important treaty, lands exchanged, and so on) and add fictional characters and events to it. The difference between the reality of the event and the alternate history creates tension that keeps the reader interested. The writer tells a story in narrative form and uses the narrative techniques that fiction and history share (p. 33).

For Hellekson, alternate history is based on history, and takes a turning point beyond the limits of reality to unfold differently. The gap between the real past and the alternate history attracts the reader’s curiosity to be involved, and to recall a real past. In addition, alternate history as a literary genre conjures up its engrossing effect on the reader through the combination of narrative form and techniques shared between history and alternate history. In the play, nonetheless, Higgins successfully manages to maintain this engrossment through a dramatic form and techniques that sustain the connection between history and alternate history. In accordance with these points, Derek J. Thiess writes in his introduction to *Relativism, Alternate History, and the Forgetful Reader* (2015), “The alternate history asks questions about time, linearity, determinism, and the implicit link between past and present. It considers the individual’s role in making history, and it foregrounds the constructedness and narrativity of history” (p. 9). Higgins, in this regard, asks questions in his play utilizing a dramatic

construct that successfully forefronts the connection between past and present through the reader that has a principal role in the creation and reception of alternate history.

*The True Death of Socrates* requires a knowledgeable recipient who understands how the incidents of the play stretch beyond the limits of a real past. Higgins addresses the informed reader, the elite, and the knowledgeable who is aware that what he/she reads is not reality. It requires from the reader a comprehensive knowledge to perceive the point of divergence that Higgins is altering. The informed reader has an active role, because he/she is aware of “the bifurcation. There are two diverging paths, at least one of which is history, and at least one other of which is an alternative version realized narratively in the text” (Singles, p. 8). The reader with his/her knowledge knows how to distinguish the point of divergence that separates alternate history from real history. He/she is aware when and where the plot has a deviation. Hence, alternate histories need a kind of skill from the reader to perceive the memory of what had occurred, and to get access to new perceptions beyond reality. Kathleen Singles argues that, “Alternate Histories require a specific kind of competency from the reader, who must be able to identify the alternative version of history as alternative and reason about the variance between that alternative and history” (p. 9). The reader, in turn, plays an active role; the role of a model recipient who conceives what actual reality might look like has history taken an alternate turn. The reader attempts to elicit the intended meaning of the author. According to Kathleen Singles,

The reader of the alternate history must, to varying degrees, be sensitive to such textual features and, with the help of his own knowledge of history, not only recognize the divergence from the narrative of history as such, but also consider the ways in which the fictional history is different from the one that they know (p. 110).

The informed reader, knows the border line between history and alternate history, and does not confuse between reality and imagination. This means that the reader compares his/her knowledge

of a real history with the alternate history presented in the text. An elite reader is conscious that imagination replaces real events. In Eugene Garver's book *Aristotle's Rhetoric and Poetics* (2005), Aristotle argues, "In political oratory there is very little opening for narration; nobody can 'narrate' what has not yet happened. If there is narration at all, it will be of past events, the recollections of which is to help the hearers to make better plans for the future" (p. 360). For Aristotle, creating a historical work is inspired by history. Altering History keeps the reader interested in the action. The intended blend between history and alternate history is impressible, though there is a strong border line between history as a source of inspiration for the author and alternate history as represented in the text with its twisting of reality. In his article 'Alternate History', Andy Duncan defines an Alternate History that "it is not a history at all, but a work of fiction in which history as we know it is changed for dramatic and often ironic effect" (James & Mendlesohn, p. 209). Alternate history, in this sense, is a piece of fiction that has no relation to reality, but it relies on the response of an informed reader to perceive the blurring borders between real past and alternate history. In his introduction to *Relativism, Alternate History, and the Forgetful Reader* (2015), Derek J. Thiess writes, "The reader must know enough history, must be able to access enough megatext, in order to recognize the changes that the writer is making" (p. 18). The reader must be knowledgeable enough to identify the alternate scenario, and be involved in the action to conceive the changes from the real history. In his introduction to *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals*, Niall Ferguson claims that,

we cannot resist imagining the alternative scenarios: what might have happened, if only we had or had not. We picture ourselves avoiding past blunders, or committing blunders we narrowly avoided. Nor are such thoughts mere day-dreams. Of course, we know perfectly well that we cannot travel back in time and do these things differently. But the business of imagining such counterfactuals is a vital part of the way in which we learn. Because decisions about the future are -

usually - based on weighing up the potential consequences of alternative courses of action, it makes sense to compare the actual outcomes of what we did in the past with the conceivable outcomes of what we might have done (p. 2).

Ferguson, in this regard, argues that it is impossible to go back in time to change history, but it is possible to do a mental time travel to the past, because our future decisions are influenced by evaluating and considering a past history. History is a collective memory essential to understand societies to evaluate the future.

My purpose is basically to show how alternate history as a genre of speculative literature provides an accepted room for Frank Higgins to blend comedy with tragedy, and to establish a relation between fact and fiction in *The True Death of Socrates*. The study, as well, explores how Higgins juxtaposes imagination with reality to evoke a real past, and make an implied link between history and alternate history to illuminate our understanding of history. Higgins speculatively reenacts Socrates' imprisonment through a humorous representation of a master-disciple relationship to raise philosophical questions about the conflict between life and death. Higgins sketches the historical events of Socrates' execution in a caricature representation to move the reader's imagination beyond reality. From the outset of the play, the features of an alternate history are announced in the first few words of Frank Higgins as he hypothesizes 'what-if' the Greek philosopher, Socrates, did not sip the hemlock and succeeded to escape from prison? Higgins wonders 'what-if' Socrates does not behave with dignity in the moral sense? Examining the hypothesis of what never happened helps the reader to appreciate the memory of what happened. It is an attempt of the author to evoke the past to explore the present, as it moves the readers' imagination. Characters and events are not realistically portrayed in the play to reflect a logical development of Socrates' imprisonment and execution; rather, they are portrayed in a caricature representation to stir the model reader's imagination beyond reality. The title is symbolic and reflects the author's view. Higgins argues that he had

chosen the title of his play, *The True Death of Socrates*, for two reasons:

- 1) The play shows that our belief about how Socrates died is false; that he actually kills Plato then passes himself off as Plato and writes great things about Socrates. So this is comedy.
- 2) In a sense, what Socrates stands for ‘dies’ in that he doesn’t live up to his teachings about honor; when things get close to the end he’d rather do anything to live—even kill someone—than to die with dignity. This is a more serious theme. (Higgins, Frank. Wed. 12 April, 2.26 AM, 2023).

Higgins chooses a symbolic title for the play because what Socrates stands for ‘dies’, namely, he does not live up to his teachings about honor. Socrates does not behave with dignity at the end of the play, rather, he is stripped of his humanity, and poisons his disciple Plato. The protagonist’s immoral act contradicts reality, because the real history tells us that Socrates refuses to violate the legal order issued by the Athenian authority, because he believes that escaping from prison means breaking the law, and the important thing for Socrates is not just to live long, but to live well. In *Crito*, Socrates inquires, “And is it still agreed or not that to live well amounts to the same thing as to live honourably and just?” (Tarrant: *Crito*, p. 83). Socrates attempts to lay down the principles which should govern people to live well as indicated by Plato’s Socrates in *The Gorgias*, “The Good Man Desires, Not a Long, But a Virtuous Life” (Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato*, p. 301). Socrates, who dedicated much of his life to understand the nature of justice, is convinced that he should never break the law even if it seems to be unjust.

*The True Death of Socrates* is a one-act play that occurs in one scene, set in a closed room in one single place in a jail cell in ancient Athens, and within the course of one single day at the end of the fourth century in 399 B.C.E. Higgins’ philosophical farce follows the encounter of the three caricaturized philosophers, Socrates, Plato,



and Doofus (Aristotle) in the prison cell of Socrates, and the devotion of his close friend and disciple Plato to record his words of wisdom or his philosophical lessons before he drinks the hemlock. The play highlights the master-disciple relationship through the deliberate use of simple colloquial dialogues between the three philosophers, who are engaged in an active argument over the meaning of morality versus immorality or (dignity, honor, and freewill). The play, in this regard, advocates knowledge, and how lessons are transmitted from Socrates to his disciples. The characters and events are woven together with a tendency to create an alternate history. The events have a logical sequence with a beginning, middle and an open end that revolves around Socrates' execution. The events of the play cannot be understood inseparable from their historical background.

In *The True Death of Socrates*, Higgins alters history and deviates reality to engage the audiences in the action of the play. He employs the setting to pinpoint a problematic situation following Plato's attempt to arrange for Socrates a noble demise that unexpectedly concludes with Plato's death and Socrates' escape. Time and place are integrated together to highlight the difficulty of each moment in the life of Socrates in prison before he drinks the hemlock. Time and place, in this sense, are employed to echo Socrates' refusal to drink the hemlock for a heroic death. Higgins follows the unities of Aristotle's *Poetics*, respectively, focusing only on two unities: the unity of time and the unity of place. Nevertheless, the play deviates from the unity of action since it employs the bifurcation in which alternate history merges with real history. The audiences are faced with a plot that splits into two timelines: the first is the real history timeline that serves as a background for the second; or the alternate history timeline. Higgins employs the real timeline and gradually resolves it throughout the play starting from the point of divergence to build his alternate history timeline.

The play outset with Plato who pays a visit to his master Socrates who is sentenced to death by poison. Plato accompanies his disciple Doofus (Aristotle) with him to benefit from his knowledge and to take notes. They wait conversing with each other outside the

prison cell until they are allowed to enter. Plato's visit to Socrates in prison has a dual purposes: it serves to show appreciation to a beloved master, and to record Socrates' last words of wisdom in a book that would create a great history and propagate Socrates' philosophical ideas. Plato's last encounter with Socrates and the intensity of the master-disciple relationship between them builds up towards exciting events. From the opening of the play, Higgins attempts to engage the audiences' interest to be involved in the action, breaking the fourth wall, and communicating directly with them. In an exchange between Plato and Doofus (Aristotle), we read:

**Plato:** Ah, here we are outside the prison cell of the great man. Blue sky, bright sun. And yet a dark day. The gods like to dick us around with dramatic irony.

**Doofus:** Tell me, master, why is Socrates sentenced to death?

**Plato:** For the most serious crime of all: subverting the minds of young people.

**Doofus:** You can be executed for that?

**Plato:** ... We must distinguish between what is real, and what is comforting to believe is real.—Doofus, I'm a great philosopher; you might want to take notes when I speak... Socrates has been sentenced to the harshest penalty of all.

(Higgins, Demastes (ed.), p. 5).

The opening dialogue of the play sheds light on Plato as a master who revives the Socratic method of teaching by attracting disciples of his own and forming a circle of admirers to imitate his master Socrates. Plato says, "Doofus, I'm a great philosopher; you might want to take notes when I speak." (Higgins, p. 5). The world created by Socrates could only be imitated by Plato but not rivaled. In *The Master-Disciple Relationship*, Huston Smith states:

The master forms a circle around himself which authentic disciples do not dream of fully replicating. They can radiate some of the charisma they receive from their master, and may

attract disciples of their own, becoming thereby masters in their own right. But it will not be the same universe they shared with their own master, and they see it as imitating, not rivaling, the original universe they inhabited (Nasr & O'Brien, 2006, *The Essential Sophia*, p. 151).

The reader notices glimpses of sorrow and grief in the argument between Plato and his disciple Doofus (Aristotle) as the former explicates how Socrates is convicted to death. Plato describes the day of his visit to his master as a cheerful day with a “blue sky and bright sun. And yet it is a dark day” (Higgins, Demastes (ed.), p. 5). In the course of narrating Socrates’ tragedy to his disciple Doofus (Aristotle), Plato creates an irony as he compares dissimilar things in a tentative way when he points out that the weather is fine but it is dark as it is the day of Socrates’ execution. Such twists on words imply Plato’s feeling of sorrow for the execution of his master. In an exchange between Plato and Doofus (Aristotle), Plato explains the importance of his visit to Socrates in prison, because people in future would rely on his records of Socrates’ heroic life and death. Plato says,

**Plato:** No book contract. If people in the future are going to know about Socrates, it will depend on my report of his heroic life, and death, Sniff. (Higgins, Demastes (ed.), p. 6)

In this sense, Plato explains to Doofus the importance of recording Socrates’ last words of wisdom because Socrates authored no book, and his ideas were narrated from the perspectives of his contemporaries in fictional dialogues, particularly Plato. In *Lessons of the Master* (2002), George Steiner argues, “Socrates was a paradigmatic teacher. He sought not to impart but to awaken and wrote nothing down because he believed that only what we learn by heart will ‘ripen and deploy within us’ ” (p. 26).

According to the stage directions, Socrates is secluded in the prison cell, with his back to the audiences.

[Socrates sits in his cell with his back to the audience. Plato and his student Doofus enter at the side. Plato carries a cup]

(Higgins, Demastes (ed.), p. 5)

The opening scene of the play indicates Socrates' resentment of his life in a way that is reflected in sitting with his back to the audiences. This scene shows a feeling of loneliness that overwhelms Socrates as he is isolated in a cell, dreading the time of his execution. Higgins puts the prison experience before the audiences into a real and confined space (onstage) with caricatures (actors). This atmosphere creates both a sympathy between the audiences and the actors as an initial point of diversion, as it creates a sense of Socrates' imprisonment with the enclosed walls of the prison (onstage). Plato, carrying the poison readily prepared in a cup, stands with Doofus (Aristotle) nearby the door of the prison cell. Plato asks Socrates to accept God's will and drink the hemlock to create a heroic history, "People need you to die in a way that is *meaningful*" (Higgins, Demastes (ed.), p. 7). Plato, in this regard, encourages Socrates to remember his speech about the immortality of the soul, and the blessings that he deserves in the afterlife.

In Higgins' play, time corresponds with the historical date of Socrates' Trial and Death in 399 B.C. Time moves from the present alternate reality to the real past in the memory of the informed reader to display the borderline between history and alternate history. Therefore, time is pivotal in the play, because it signifies a liminal period during Socrates' transition from life to death in anticipation of his execution, and how he refuses this transition as an expression of his fear of death. The play also shows how Plato's determined advocacy of a historically memorable heroic death over a 'real' self-effacing death instigates Socrates' struggle to survive. The incidents of the play are chronologically ordered according to their occurrence in reality but the action deviates at the end to form an alternate history. On the other hand, the place (prison) aims to dramatically historicize a precarious time in the life of Socrates to articulate or set forth aspects of the Socratic irony, and to signify his struggle to live. Higgins epitomizes the encounter between Socrates and Plato—teacher and

student—and the comic argument that runs between them over time. In an exchange between Socrates and Plato, we read:

**Socrates:** No, *in addition* to that. And tell me this, Plato. What year is it?

**Plato:** Three ninety-nine, B.C.

**Socrates:** Yes! And last year was four hundred B.C. Why are the numbers counting *down*? And counting down to what? And what is this *B.C.*? I want to know!

**Plato:** None of us will live that long to find out. What matters is a noble death. People need you to die in a way that is *meaningful*. (Higgins, Demastes (ed.), p. 7)

The above dialogue between Socrates and Plato shows that Higgins imported features of the actual world and presented it into an alternate past when Socrates inquires about the sequence of time and why it is counted backwards, and 'counting down to what?' (Higgins, Demastes (ed.), p. 7). Socrates asks Plato because he is perplexed when he notices that time does not unfold chronologically from past to present. This causes a sense of confusion when he conflates the past, the present and the future to explore the absurdity of time as he approaches death. Socrates' first words to Plato are a question that leads to further questions in an attempt to share ideas with his student Plato, and to gain information. So the above argument between Socrates and Plato shows that Socrates has an interrogating attitude with which he approaches everything he encounters. His question is ambiguous, though it reflects his logic as indicated by George Steiner in *Lessons of the Master* (2002), "The Master, the pedagogue addresses the intellect, the imagination, the nervous system, and the very inward of his listener...Address and reception, the psychological and the physical are strictly inseparable" (Steiner, p. 23). Time before Christ is counted backwards before the Common Era (B.C.E) and forwards in the Common Era (C.E.). This is how time is chronologically counted and arranged regardless of its illogical occurrence. The dialogue between Socrates and Plato over time, as

well, reflects Socrates' strategy to understand Plato's opinion. Socrates does not state views, rather, he asks questions that need answers to explore what his disciple thought to be true, and does not present a definitive answer to his questions. He creates an argument to invoke critical thinking and to generate knowledge.

Through this farce play, Higgins steps beyond history and presents an alternate picture about Socrates who does not set a role model for the young Athenians when he hesitates to accept a noble death that will immortalize him. In *The Theatre of Transformation Postmodernism in American Drama* (2005), Kerstin Schmidt writes, "These modes of creativity and critical speculation attest to the variety of the postmodern scene, but this pluralism has also tended to hide the fact that, in tendency, they are all oriented beyond history or, rather, they all aspire to the specialization of time" (Schmidt, p. 75). Higgins challenges the actual history with a nightmare scenario that shocks the audience with its absurdity, and shows Socrates as an immoral philosopher. Higgins presents the idea of honor and nobility advocated by Plato to maintain the heroic image of Socrates versus the ugly reality that distorts this image. Socrates faces a critical life-and-death situation. He has to make an irremediable decision and choose between dying for his ideas or giving up on them as elucidated by William W. Demastes in his introduction to *The True Death of Socrates*, "Socrates balks at stoically noble suicide that will make him immortal in the annals of Western philosophy, begging the question: How many among us are really willing to die for an idea?" (Demastes, p. vii). The crucial question about the moral principles versus the immoral ones, or behaving with dignity versus behaving with ignominy and its relation with the notion of the heroic death from Plato's perspective, is the core issue on which the whole play is based. In due course of the play, Higgins' protagonist, Socrates, jeeringly argues,

**Socrates:** But I taught you everything you know.

**Plato:** And what I know is the importance of honor. And of leaving a legacy that will inspire people for thousands of years.

(Higgins, Demastes (ed.), p. 7).

This alternate scenario is inclusive of outcomes contrary to the actual past history, as exemplified when Socrates decides to violate the law and refuses to carry out the death penalty. Here, imagery is blended with historical reality, aiming to subvert what the audiences think they already know about Socrates' execution. In an exchange between Socrates and Plato, we read:

**Plato:** ... It is time, Socrates, it is I, Plato.

On this your final day, what are your words of wisdom?

**Socrates:** Aieeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Get that away from me!!

**Plato:** Calm down, O great teacher.

**Socrates:** Plato, I beg you, help me escape! Smuggle me out under your toga!

**Plato:** What?

**Socrates:** You're right; won't work. I'll leave in his clothing; we leave him here in my clothing. The guards won't find out for hours, I'll be on a boat before anyone knows.

**Plato:** This is no way to leave this world.

**Socrates:** But it's a way to leave this cell.

**Plato:** This lacks honor.

**Socrates:** Honor? What is honor? I want to study honor for another ten years.

**Plato:** I will not be part of this

**Socrates:** You won't help your old teacher escape?

**Plato:** Never.

(Higgins, Demastes (ed.), pp. 6-7)

The above argument begins abruptly with Plato who attempts to alleviate the fear of his teacher, and convince him to drink the hemlock. Their argument shows how the fear of the impending death loosens Socrates's tongue as clearly shown in his words as he begs Plato to help him escape. Yet, Plato believes that Socrates has lived ethically and is worthy of the afterlife, therefore, he deserves to die

honorably. Socrates replies that he does not yet know what honor is, and aspires to live for ten years to understand the meaning of honor.

Alternatively, Higgins' Socrates sees that it is dishonorable for Plato not to help his master to leave prison. Socrates is represented as a character who strives to escape prison and restore his freedom, than to create a heroic history. He cares more about his freedom than to die honorably. However, Higgins' Plato has a different point of view as he believes that it is dishonorable for Socrates to behave with indignity, to break the law and escape. This illuminates the gap between the representation of Socrates in the play and the moral philosopher in reality. Higgins' protagonist, in this sense, contrasts with Socrates, the moral philosopher, who stands by his principles until the last moment of his life. The play, in this regard, presents a divergence in history that is narrated and resolved differently from what the informed reader knows to be true.

In *The Dialogues of Plato*, Plato's Socrates articulates the meaning of honor. According to him, the rescue of one's friend is honorable in one point of view, but evil in another. In an exchange between Socrates and Alcibiades, we read:

**Socrates:** And are honourable things sometimes good and sometimes not good, or are they always good?

**Alcibiades:** I rather think, Socrates, that some honourable things are evil.

**Socrates:** And are some dishonourable things good?

**Alcibiades:** Yes.

**Socrates:** And to rescue another under such circumstances is honourable, in respect of the attempt to save those whom we ought to save; and this is courage?

**Alcibiades:** True.

**Socrates:** Then the rescue of one's friends is honourable in one point of view, but evil in another?

**Alcibiades:** True.

(Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato*, pp. 746-747).



Higgins relies on humor to convey Socrates' view about the "moral weakness" (Reilly, p. 101), which means that "the only real evil is the moral evil" (Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato*, p. 303). This moral evil lies hidden in the human soul. This view is illustrated in the speech of Socrates as he is sarcastically criticizes Plato for his selfishness and egoism. What Plato judges as good and moral for Socrates, is not the same as what Socrates judges as good and moral from his own perspective. Each of them seeks his benefit. In a humorous exchange between Socrates and Plato, Plato urges Socrates to behave with nobility.

**Plato:** Then people won't be inspired, will they? Human beings need heroes. Now do you help me or not?

**Socrates:** Don't do it. He's being selfish. If he doesn't have a hero and a heroic death, he won't even be able to outsell a cookbook.

**Doofus:** Master?

**Plato:** If I can't sell books, I can't give free scholarships to needy students, can I?

**Doofus:** As you wish master.

**Socrates:** You traitor to the truth.

**Plato:** Hold him down.

**Socrates:** No, no! Get back! Let go of me! Let go!

[Doofus holds him down. Plato tries to pour the hemlock into his mouth.]

**Plato:** Be noble! This is not painful. A tingling and then numbness.— Stop spitting.—Doofus, give me that parchment.—A sad thing, Socrates. The notes of your final moment must be used as a funnel.—Hold his mouth open!

**Socrates:** Argh! Argh!

**Plato:** Be noble! Be noble!

**Socrates:** Argh! (Higgins, Demastes (ed.), pp. 8-9).

Socrates mocks Plato who aspires to be famous at the expense of his life saying, "If he doesn't have a hero and a heroic death, he won't

even be able to outsell a cookbook” (Higgins, p. 8). Socrates also accuses Doofus (Aristotle) of being a conspirator to the truth, because he agrees with Plato. Ironically, the words of Socrates “Argh! Argh!” are repeated by Plato as he sips the hemlock. The repetition, here, causes laughter. The above quote shows that the principle of heroism and how Higgins’ Plato understands it, is not the same for Socrates. Both characters have different philosophies and principles in life. Socrates’ view about his right to live contradicts with Plato’s view to create a great history, and to leave a legacy that will inspire people in the future. Each of them fails to convince the other with his viewpoint. Higgins summarizes his view saying, “Overall, the conflict here is the way things really are versus the way that we’d like things to be” (Higgins, Frank. Fri, Apr 7, 5:46 PM, 2023). For Higgins, the apparent difference in the viewpoints of both characters may be interpreted as the difference in their principles, and their social practices in life. This difference is evident in their argument from the beginning of the play as indicated by Higgins,

Both Socrates and Plato are at different points of their lives. Socrates is older, and his teachings have gotten himself into so much trouble that he has been sentenced to death. At this point, Socrates just wants to survive. Plato is interested in creating a historical narrative that celebrates virtue. Overall, the conflict is ‘here is the way things really are versus the way that we’d like things to be.’ (Higgins, Frank. Fri, Apr 7, 5:46 PM, 2023).

The absence of a clear objective criterion acceptable to both philosophers may lead to their conflict along the events of the play. Socrates struggles to survive amid the flaws of Plato to record a historical narrative that celebrates virtue. Plato tries to convince Socrates to die a heroic death. Yet, Socrates wants more life. Here, the reader is brought face to face with an important aspect in Socrates’ character as a master who addresses the mind of his disciple to convince him of his right to live. In an argument between Socrates and Plato, we read:

**Socrates:** [*Blows a raspberry*] If you help me escape, I'll give you all my money.

**Plato:** You have no money. You're a teacher.

**Socrates:** Please don't kill me. I have a wife and daughter—kill *them*.

**Plato:** Get a hold of yourself. You've often spoken of the underworld, and what things might be like there. Now you'll know.

**Socrates:** But I don't want to know *yet*. Please! Help your old friend and teacher get out of here.

**Plato:** I cannot.

**Socrates:** You're right. I should not have expected you to help me.

**Doofus:** Should I still be taking notes?

**Plato:** No. The world can't know about this. Socrates, how can you behave in this ignoble way?

**Socrates:** Because I want more life. Is that a crime? I have questions that I haven't found the answers to yet.

(Higgins, Demastes (ed.), pp. 6-7)

Higgins immerses the audiences in an alternate scenario that departs from the known history because according to *The Dialogues of Plato*, Socrates shows loyalty to the state and accepts the penalty of death in prison. Socrates expresses his willingness to die in order to engage with the elite thinkers of the underworld. Plato says, "You've often spoken of the underworld, and what things might be like there. Now you'll know" (Higgins, p. 7). Alternatively, in the play, Socrates denounces any will to die a heroic death saying: "But I don't want to know *yet*. Please! Help your old friend and teacher get out of here" (Higgins, p. 7). The dialogue between both characters is comical as it shows how Socrates spends his last days in prison fearing death, and seeking to escape. Socrates tries in a way or another to defend his right to live. Socrates' speech mirrors a sense of disappointment that is reflected through his multifarious offers to save his life. In a kind of cynicism, Socrates pleads Plato to leave him and kill his wife and daughter instead, or to help him disguise in Doofus' clothing leaving him in the cell, and the guards would not discover the matter for hours

until Socrates escapes in a boat out of Athens. Yet, Plato considers this behavior that lacks dignity as shameful. After a long silence of listening to the two philosophers (Socrates and Plato), Doofus finally comments saying, “Should I still be taking notes?” (Higgins, Demastes (ed.), p. 7).

From the beginning of the play, Higgins establishes for the master-disciple relationship and the importance of dialogue between the master and his disciple to get knowledge. However, Doofus (Aristotle), who is represented as a young and naïve disciple that follows his master’s advice and records every word, surprised his master Plato with a question about his opinion about the execution of Socrates, and the meaning of free will. This point twists from reality as Plato appeals for Doofus (Aristotle) to convince Socrates to drink the hemlock. In a conversation between Plato and Doofus, we read:

**Plato:** Doofus, help me convince Socrates to die a great death.

**Doofus:** Uh, question first, master, since we’re supposed to ask questions?

**Plato:** Yes, yes, what is it?

**Doofus:** It’s about, well, free will?

**Socrates:** Brilliant boy!

**Plato:** The voluntary death of Socrates embodies free will.

**Doofus:** But if it’s not true—

**Plato:** Then people won’t be inspired, will they? Human beings need heroes. Now do you help me or not?

(Higgins, Demastes (ed.), p. 8).

It seems humorous the impassive dialogue between Plato and his disciple Doofus (Aristotle) when Doofus turns to his master to ask: “But if it’s not true—that the voluntary death of Socrates does not embody freewill” (Higgins, Demastes (ed.), p. 8). Doofus goes on to discuss the implications of law for the idea of the individual’s free will. For Doofus, the compulsion of Socrates to pay his life with poison although he is morally innocent, is an involuntary act and it is apparently wrong because “no one willingly does wrong” (Gully, p.

85). This means that no one who possesses knowledge does wrong as indicated by Socrates in the *Gorgias*, ‘Virtue is a knowledge’ (Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato*, p. 306). The knowledgeable individual desires for what appears to be good and right for his benefit. Higgins’ Plato tries to persuade Doofus that the voluntary death of Socrates embodies free will, and human beings need heroes to inspire them even if this is unjust. Doofus’ question to his master is complex, because it has as much to do with honesty, reasonableness, and courage. Doofus questions his master Plato to elicit his opinion, and to understand his character. Plato’s speech with Doofus rests on persuasion as an effective method to convince his disciple. After a long silence of listening to the argument between Plato and his disciple Doofus, Socrates praises Doofus for his excellent question about freewill. The argument between the three characters, is humorous and absurd at the same time. Doofus gazes carefully at his masters with an imperturbable face and takes notes to learn. In an exchange between Socrates and Plato, we read:

**Socrates:** This morning I told the guard to put parsley, not hemlock, in the wine that he’d give to you.

**Plato:** But the guard knew he had to give you hemlock.

**Socrates:** He did. In the wine he gave to me.

**Plato:** But why?

**Socrates:** Always have a Plan B. Let that be a lesson, Doofus.

**Doofus:** Noted, *master*.

**Plato:** But that means you’ve poisoned *me*: Plato, your greatest student! (Higgins, Demastes (ed.), pp.9-10).

The above quote is masked by humor, as it has a deeper meaning. It shows how Doofus (Aristotle) substitutes Plato with Socrates, as he begins to side with Socrates calling him master, and follows his philosophy as signified by Doofus’ italicized word ‘*master*’. Socrates begins to teach Doofus an important lesson that he should have plan B in case of necessity, because Man has a right to live, and life is worthy in itself. Doofus listens carefully to Socrates

and takes notes. Higgins, in this sense, lays bare the relation between the master and his disciple, and the role of the teacher as a guidance to his students. With Socrates' plan B that unexpectedly concludes with Plato's death, Higgins stretches beyond reality, and imagines an alternate scenario when Socrates does not behave with dignity and poisons Plato. Ironically, Plato begins as an adviser and ends as a victim. At the beginning of the play, Socrates begs Plato to show mercy and help him escape from prison but he refuses. At the end of the play, Plato begs Socrates not to kill him. Plato, in this sense, proves to be naïve and blind, because he was poisoned with the same hemlock that he brought for Socrates. In a conversation between Plato and Socrates, we read:

**Plato:** Don't do it!

**Socrates:** Plato, you are a pain in the ass.

**Plato:** You'll never get away with it. They'll come after you both.

**Socrates:** Actually, no. "Necessity is the mother of invention." I will take on the identity of Plato. Human beings need a hero? I'll give 'em one. And I say, 'Socrates died a noble death'.

**Plato:** No. (Higgins, Demastes (ed.), p. 11).

The conflict between Socrates and Plato at the opening of the play, is not resolved at the end. Socrates decides to pose as Plato after leaving prison, and to declare that Socrates died a heroic death, because he has a motto in life that "necessity is the mother of invention" (Higgins, Demastes (ed.), p. 11). Doofus, who witnesses Plato's death, is frightened that Socrates would kill him to bury the crime. Socrates promises Doofus that he will not hurt him explaining that "the guards saw two men come in. They could see two men go out, carrying a body." (Higgins, Demastes (ed.), p. 11). Socrates, as well, threatens Doofus either to choose to be silent until they leave the prison or to die. In an argument between Doofus and Socrates, we read:

**Doofus:** Are you going to kill me now?

**Socrates:** You're not really very bright, are you?

**Doofus:** I'm a witness to murder. You can't let me live.

**Socrates:** Think. The guards saw two men come in. They could see two men go out, carrying a body.

[Socrates advances towards him.] I am offering you life. That's more than Plato gives you.

**Doofus:** How can I live knowing the great Plato was willing to lie? And the great Socrates was willing to kill?

**Socrates:** You'll get over it. Life?

...

(Higgins, Demastes (ed.), p. 11)

Accordingly, the twist ending of the play alters the audiences' perceptions of the preceding events. Doofus says that he could not live with the guilt that the great philosopher Socrates is stripped of his humanity, and ends up being a killer. Socrates, in turn, threatens Doofus either to be silent or to die. With this surprising end, the audiences begin to speculate about the future of Socrates after leaving prison. The play is thus left open to the audiences' imagination to predict different scenarios for Socrates after having freedom. The play has the characteristics of an alternate history with an open end in which the informed reader participates with his imagination to perceive what is beyond reality. Socrates leaves the prison walking on a stick accompanied by Doofus who, in turn, becomes Socrates' student. Socrates poses as Plato to deceive the guards and Doofus follows him out of prison after changing his name into Aristotle. With this unexpected end, the audiences are drawn to imagine the death of Plato as a new beginning for both Socrates and Doofus, and as a transitional event in their lives. In an exchange between Doofus and Socrates, Doofus says,

**Doofus:** I want something more than just life. I want a better name.

**Socrates:** Yeah, you can't attract the really quality lovers with a name like Doofus.

**Plato:** This is wrong.

...

[Socrates pours more wine down Plato's throat... Socrates touches Aristotle's face.] (Higgins, Demastes (ed.), p. 11)

The play shows an alternate historical trajectory when Socrates pours more wine down Plato's throat and ends his life to escape with Doofus (Aristotle). The name 'Doofus' is symbolic as it reflects his character as a young naïve student who is irresponsible and immature as indicated by Frank Higgins when he introduces him, "Years before, Socrates was the teacher of Plato. Now Plato is an adult and is the teacher of Doofus (Aristotle). When Plato was a student, he probably was as naïve in the way Doofus (Aristotle) is now" (Higgins, Frank. Fri, April 7, 5:46 PM, 2023).

Consequently, Socrates succeeds to escape death at the end of the play and Plato is poisoned instead. By altering a real past and wiping out Socrates' future, Higgins sets the course of the events into an imaginary path. The audiences feel pity for Plato, because he "suffers undeserved misfortunes" (Lucas, *Aristotle's Poetics* (1968), p. 275). With this unexpected turn, the play deviates from the real history. Higgins, in turn, creates a sense of plausibility inside the audiences that is realized with this point of divergence as indicated by Singles, "The type of counterfactual that allows for the most plausible alternative argument is one that alters a decision or changes an event in a way that would have been unpredictable by all of the participants" (Singles, *Alternate History*, p. 91). In *The Fiction Writer's Guide to Alternate History: A Handbook on Craft, Art, and History* (2023), Jack Dann agrees with Singles' opinion as he suggested that "a divergence point should be plausible, definite, small in itself, and massive in consequence" (Dann, p. 4). The way Plato and Doofus are introduced at the opening of the play to visit Socrates in prison and record his last words of wisdom before his execution, creates expectations for the audiences. However, all these expectations are destroyed with a surprising end in which Socrates does not behave with dignity, and kills his disciple Plato. The depiction of Socrates' triumph to escape death and its aftermath surprises the audiences.



With this fabricated close at which the imaginary history departs from reality, Socrates assumes Plato's role in disguise to declare that Socrates died a heroic death. Through this alternate end, Higgins' Socrates shows a sharp contrast from the character of the real great philosopher who died with dignity. Professor Frank Higgins declares at the end of my interview with him that,

I like leaving the play up open to the audiences to imagine different scenarios for Socrates after escaping. Part of what Socrates will do is to write the true history (actually, a false history that Socrates makes up as he poses as Plato).

(Higgins, Frank. Fri, April 7, 5:46 PM, 2023).

Eventually, with this open end, the play leaves room for the reader's speculation. Creating a speculative end in Higgins's play invites the reader to assess the historical scene and to suggest different interpretations. Higgins presents a distorted picture of Socrates that deviates from reality and creates an alternate past worse than the real historical record to support the present. With this alternate scenario, Higgins drives the audiences at the end of the play to condemn Socrates for his behaviour that is devoid of dignity instead of sympathizing with him as a prisoner. In addition, Higgins compels the audiences to postulate an alternative future for Socrates after leaving prison with Aristotle. Higgins closes the play with a philosophical statement that is masked with comedy to summarize the reality. Socrates says, "How little does the common herd know of Truth" (Higgins, Demastes (ed.), p. 11). This statement means that the jail cell, in reality as it is in the play, symbolizes the barrier that is standing between the truth and the alteration of truth. Socrates means that the common people outside prison are ignorant of what happened to Plato inside the jail cell. Accordingly, Socrates will live freely protected by impersonating Plato.

## Conclusion

Through using Gavriel D. Rosenfeld's and Kathleen Singles' theories of Alternate History on Frank Higgins' *The True Death of Socrates*, the study reaches the conclusion that Higgins successfully interconnects alternate history with history to discuss the idea of moral versus immoral principles, and the heroic death. The researcher benefited from both theories on studying Higgins' play; they equally maintain certain features that help to reveal the alternate history elements in the play. Yet, Singles' theory is more applicable on Higgins' play, because it is the recent and most comprehensive model in exploring how the timeline of history is twisted from the actual narrative of history into unrealistic events (Carver, p. 14). Higgins presents a warped farcical scenario of Socrates' execution that deviates from real history to challenge the audience knowledge of history. Higgins composes history not as it was but as a fabricated history relying on time and place to give an illusion of authenticity. The idea of reenacting past events gives freedom for the reader to fill in the gap between fact and fiction, or history and alternate history, and to engage the informed reader's imagination in an alternate scenario. In addition, this paper expounds on how Higgins involves the audience in the bifurcation with its two contrasted storylines that separates alternate history from history. In other terms, the study reveals how Higgins presents a point of divergence that achieves a sense of plausibility inside the audiences in which history contrasts reality, and Socrates escapes death. Higgins wonders about "the differences that would have happened had certain events 'taken another turn'" (Squire, p. viii). Hence, the play does not mirror reality, but rather, through this point of divergence, Higgins portrays the unexpected decisions of the characters leading to dramatic consequences that contradict the normalized narrative of history. The audiences, in turn, speculate an alternative future for the characters based on their imagination. The play, in this regard, is not a record of real history. Conversely, Higgins' hypothetical 'What if?' question challenges the documentation of human history and its roots in the memory of the generations.

Higgins relies on humor in his style in the play to convey his alternate history view, and to effectively portray the Socratic irony. He uses humor to move the reader's imagination beyond reality to ruminate other possibilities. Higgins successfully uses eloquent language that carries the meanings effectively to the reader. Despite its designation as a comic farce that inspires laughter with its representation of Socrates as a seventy-year old humorous caricature who aspires to live to "study honor for another ten years" (Higgins, *Demastes* (ed.), p. 6), the play evokes meanings far beyond reality and diverges from the normalized narrative of history via blending alternate history with real history. The audiences, in turn, have an imaginary experience met between their prediction and their historical knowledge. Higgins exaggerates in dramatizing a deviation from history, along with its unfolded outcomes. The encounter between Socrates and his disciples in prison before his death meshes with the audience's background knowledge. Higgins creates a sense of plausibility inside the reader that Socrates is going to die. Yet, this probability is vanished once a notable moment of divergence happens, and Socrates kills his disciple Plato, and impersonates himself as Plato to escape with Doofus (Aristotle). With this surprising end, Higgins invites the audience to postulate a new beginning for Socrates after leaving prison. The reader attributes the success of Socrates' escaping death to a planned factor and, in turn, sympathizes with Plato. This gives the story's ending a more emotional reception.

## Notes:

1. regarded as a contemporary humorist dramatist, haiku poet, and an adjunct professor at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, U.S.A. He is a leading American playwright whose writing career has its influence on the American theatre that extended over forty years with his celebrated plays that include *The Sweet By 'n' By* performed at the Williamstown Theatre Festival in (1993) as a transgenerational mythological drama narrating three generations of Appalachian Women to establish the importance of family, place, and religion, in addition to his musical play *Black Pearl Sings!* (2006), *Questioning* (2006), and *The True Death of Socrates* (2013). Notably, Higgins explores diverse topics in his dramas incorporating his use of humor, alternate history, prison theatre, racial issues, and political allegory. His philosophical farce *The True Death of Socrates*, first performed in Broadway theatre in New York City, is included in *The Best American Short Plays* series (2012-2013). It has achieved a prevalent success and an eminent reputation for Frank Higgins as one of the great American dramatists.
2. 'Socratic Dialogue' as a literary genre emerges in Athens during the fourth century BC, immediately after Socrates' death in 399 BC, in order to bear testimony and leave a durable trace of Socrates' life and method. The Socratic Method, as a dialogic practice experienced by various interlocutors, has obviously an earlier origin, which can be traced back to the discursive or rhetoric practices characterizing democratic Athens. Public speeches, orations, and discussions in court mark the emergence of an art of the word that is nurtured by democracy. (Peters, pp. 5083-5084)
3. The 'Socratic Problem' refers to the historical and methodological problem that historians confront when they attempt to reconstruct the philosophical doctrines of the historical Socrates. (Morrison, p. 1)
4. Socrates initiates the dialectical method. Dialectic means a co-operative inquiry carried on in conversation between two or more minds that are equally bent, not on getting the better of the argument, but on arriving at the truth. A tentative suggestion ('hypothesis') put forward by one speaker is corrected and improved until the full meaning is clearly stated. The criticism that follows may end in complete rejection or lead on to another suggestion which (if the examination has been skillfully conducted) ought to approach nearer to the truth. (Cornford, p. 30)

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