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# Socrates



A Poem Play

WILLIS G. SEARS











# Socrates

A Poem Play



By

Willis G. Sears

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## Foreword

Socrates was one of the towering men of the race; and one of its most unique characters. A philosopher, he sought for Truth. He loved to reason, and to teach. He refused money for his teachings; although poor in money values, therefore needing money. He loved life and living, yet went smilingly and without fear to his death when it was ordered by the State, and refused to seek a reduction of his sentence, or to escape, when both avenues were open to him.

For thirty days and till the return of the ship from its annual pilgrimage, executions were unlawful in Athens, and till the return of the vessel that bore its virgin tribute, he lived on and to his friends talked of death, and the great philosophies as no philosopher ever talked, before or since.

He was the acme of simplicity, intelligence and moral bravery. He made no effort to place his thought on written page, but his teachings, as given us by others, have tempered and elevated the world of men.

The most sublime thought is Truth. The greatest self-employment, the search for Truth, and the grandest occupation to be engaged in by men, is the teaching of the thinker's best thought to others. Socrates has been spoken of as the discoverer of Truth, in Greece— meaning in its best sense, the importance of the search for Truth. Criticles is a compositely pictured disciple. The parallel referred to was thought by the writer to appear as between the lark and the hawk, and Socrates and his persecutors.





# Socrates

A POEM PLAY

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TO DEVELOP A THOUGHT ON TRUTH

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PLACE: Cell in the prison at Athens, with window overlooking the sea and mountains and part of the city.

TIME: That of Socrates, on the day of his death.

PRESENT: Socrates, Criticles, Officer of the Guard in charge of Socrates, and Public Executioner.

SOCRATES: (*Standing gazing through the window.*)

Oh come, my Guardsman, with me to this place,  
Together let us look o'er yonder hills;  
And now again, the valleys in between.  
I know them all. Yes, each and ev'ry one.

OFFICER:

Except I have been absent in the wars,  
I've seen your hills and valleys ev'ry day,  
When as a youth, I played with others there,  
And romped them over like a frisky colt.  
They'll be there after you and I are gone,

Long after you and I have turned to dust.  
Considering your time's about complete,  
You'd better turn to more important things!

SOCRATES:

Important things! What are important things?

OFFICER:

Important things are those that serve the State,  
That save the people when they are at war,  
And guard 'gainst treason to the commonwealth;  
Important things maintain us as we are.  
And then sometimes they may relate to us,  
As I imagine men make up the State.

SOCRATES:

And is there growth in thy important things,  
And range of thought to thy imagining?

OFFICER:

It's not for me to match my word with thine,  
But yet I know, we all must serve the State.

SOCRATES:

Now, let us look out o'er the tossing sea.  
Again down through the busy marts and streets.  
What wondrous sights are present to our view!  
I never saw so plainly in the past,

My thought was ne'er so clear to me as now.  
I asked my friends to go that I might rest,  
And now I would that they were here again.  
At least, I wish that Criticles were here;  
He's to me most as son is to his sire;  
Send word that he remain not long away.

*(The Officer speaks to attendant who goes for  
Criticles)*

SOCRATES: *(To himself.)*

It's time the ship's been sighted that I wait.

*(To Officer.)*

My soldier, was it ever on thy heart,  
The burden of a great expectancy?  
Hast ever dreamt of rising from the ranks  
To captaincy of legions far away?  
To fight where all the articles of war,  
Were blended with most perfect strategy?  
Where soldiers wounded, sick, and weak, and sore,  
Were healed and given suitable reward?

OFFICER:

I'm one who doth obey the orders given,  
Who wastes not time in idle, useless dreams.

SOCRATES:

Oh, soldier! Take unstinted time to dream,  
And when thou dost awake, a little while,  
To live the moment of thy dream again.  
See—look once more. I count these visions now.  
There trees and vineyards dotted on the hills,  
Mark out the spots where men have tried to live,  
In such communion, as was fitting them.  
Now, wert thou ever in a prison bound,  
The term of service all but just expired,  
The prison gates that long had held thee back,  
About to open for thy liberty?

OFFICER:

I've ever been a free Athenian.

SOCRATES:

I'm glad thou'rt sure, thou hast been ever free.  
There's quite a roughing on the old sea's face,  
And ships would sail with racing speed today.  
I almost think I see a whit'ning sail,  
Where we've been looking, what see'st thou out there?

OFFICER:

It seems to be a sail. Perhaps 'tis not;  
Or yet, it may be a departing ship.



SOCRATES:

It little counts. Although I think a ship,  
And too, the one we have been looking for.  
Soldier, didst see that free bird fly just now  
Past my window? At first I thought 'twas free.  
But a mistake. 'Twas followed by a hawk.  
It coursed in fear; now this way, and now that,  
Till over there, beside that marble wall,  
'Twas fiercely seized, and one cry was its last.  
Where are my friends? Where is my Criticles?  
I hardly thought he would be gone so long.

*(Enter Criticles.)*

CRITICLES:

I could not go, nor yet could I return,  
And so I stood a little from the door.

*(He covers his face in his hands.)*

SOCRATES: *(To himself.)*

He also must have looked out o'er the sea.

*(To Criticles.)*

Feel not depressed. Death's but a fact of life,  
And no one knows, until the time's gone by,  
If any moment was by fortune cast.



Just now, a hawk within my window's view,  
Did kill and eat a scared and fleeing lark.  
Now, who doth know which fortune did attend?  
The pain hath gone that caused the lark to cry.  
But where's the lark? Its body's in the hawk.  
Its bones and flesh are there. But not the lark.  
Its song is gone. It's circling in the air.  
It's daily bathing in the golden sun.  
But where's the lark. Where is the real lark?  
How with the hawk? Perhaps a fiercer one,  
Shall find and catch, and feed on it. Or worse;  
It may be, he'll be wounded in a fight,  
Caught by a man, and fastened in a cage;  
So held within, to beat his wings and die.  
But let us not pursue a darksome thought.  
Come thou, my son, here by this shady seat,  
With pleasant breeze, to drink in from the sea,  
Let us converse once more. Perhaps our last.

OFFICER:

I will retire, that thou mayst talk more free.

*(Exit Officer.)*

CRITICLES:

Oh, Socrates, friend of my youth and life;  
Who saved that life, upon the battle's field,

Thou first of Athens' great philosophers!  
Tell me, Master, the secret of thy heart?  
Thou hast refused to spill the poisoned cup,  
Which all thy friends did seek to have thee do,  
And now time draws apace when thou must die.  
'Tis true, I know, that in thy rugged heart,  
There is no thought of guile, nor sacrilege,  
Unto Athenia's gods. Speak, Socrates,  
And tell me of thy inmost furthest thought,  
That I may know the reason of it all.  
Here Master, thou hast lived and served the State,  
And by thy word, fresh from great knowledge stored,  
Hast sent of thy philosophies to men.  
Why dost thou will to leave thy life's pursuit,  
And dry the spring whence fresh'ning waters gushed!

SOCRATES:

Oh! Some have said my thought must not go forth,  
But it must die, ev'n as my flesh must die.

CRITICLES:

Your aged form may, your thought can never die.

SOCRATES:

A thought is then like immortality;  
That lives and grows, perhaps through endless time.

It maybe comes from Him who gives us life,  
And ever is within His watchful care.

CRITICLES:

Athenians have gods for ev'ry place;  
For land, for sea, for war, and fruitage, too,  
And ev'ry thing that brings renown to Greece;  
That bears reward, and doth confound her foes;  
Each hath its god. And then, oh, Socrates!  
There are the unknown gods. We have them, too.  
I know that thou'rt respectful unto them.  
I will not urge, with words solicitous,  
That thou recant, or, rather, join the thought  
Of those who speak concretely for the State.  
Ere thou dost cross the waters of the Styx,  
Tell me thy reason, why, if martyrdom,  
Thou art impelled to drink the poison draught?

SOCRATES:

That, which I can recount to thee, is long,  
If great the patience thou accord to me.

CRITICLES:

Talk on, my Master, till thy story's through.  
My patience but a privilege is, to me.

SOCRATES :

For many years, my son, I gathered me,  
In public place, Athenia's choicest youth;  
And taught them of the things within their grasp,  
So far as teaching was within my power.  
I have been true and faithful to the State;  
Nor yet spoke slightingly of God or Greece.  
But gods are not the creatures of the mind.  
And I've been true, to my concluded thought.  
Yet son, know this, I've lived a dual part;  
With one part longing with a great desire,  
Nor could escape me, mine environment.  
And so I'll tell thee of mine inmost thought,  
And would even hadst thou not invited me.

Ofttimes have I approached my final thought;  
To those I've met on highway or in field,  
In private place, or in the market's crowd,  
But none, it seems, could understand my mind.  
Now, some have looked as if I were insane,  
While others said I did attack the gods.  
Here's the result, my gentle Criticles,  
Of thinking much, and honesty with thought.  
Why should not men hold love, each unto each?  
And dwell in common harmony and love?



Oh, Criticles! We pay the penalty  
That's always paid, while groping in the dark;  
Of stumbling 'gainst some heavy pointed thing,  
Placed there by others, with resulting hurt.

My best of thought denies we can make gods,  
And lodge them in some special niche we carve,  
Charged with such quality we give to them.  
And yet, my best thought says, there is a God,  
Who loves all men, to Whom is homage due,  
In Whom is harmony and life complete.  
And my best thought says, "Go where'er thou wilt,  
Unto the farthest man, thy brother greet."  
But all the peoples, that we know yet of,  
Are full of war, or else enslaved themselves.  
All's slavery; owning, or being owned—a slave.  
The mind's enslavement is the worst of all.  
For mental shackles, worn on mental flesh,  
Are thought as dimples, and as lightly worn.  
And trod is he who'd break the shackles' bond.  
Oh, were men free, as God would have them free,  
And solving problems of their own, and His!

**CRITICLES:**

But why obtrude a thought with which thou'rt filled,  
Into the ear that doth unwilling hear?



SOCRATES:

There's but one path falls to a teacher's lot,  
And on that line have I pursued my course.  
Philosophy compels with me the Truth;  
And points to where I plain may see the way.  
Fond parents may deny their children's right,  
But thoughts of Truth, may never be denied.  
Ne'er yet, accused of cowardice in war,  
I slew my fellows, with unwilling hand;  
(My son, that slaying was without much light!)  
I cannot let unthinking ones talk on,  
And kill my teaching, pointing at me, weak.  
But with my death, perhaps, Athenians  
May know the cause, and therefore, value it.  
The precious days speed on with rapid pace;  
And selfishness, and self-ambitious ends,  
The only goals, that urge our people on.  
Oh, Criticles, I've been so lone, sometimes,  
The mild Xantippe, freely voicing forth,  
Hath brought with her a measure of relief.

CRITICLES:

Oh, tell me further of thy mind's pursuit.  
Is there not more that thou wouldst leave behind?

SOCRATES:

Ah yes, the Truth! And of the search for it,  
That lies far back of all my questioning.  
Listen, my son, my pupil Criticles,  
And ponder well, the word I leave with thee.  
Throughout life's journey, have I sought for Truth.  
With service years I've searched for final things;  
And all that time I've talked with learned men,  
And dived into the writ and scrolled page—  
Where, as from honey stored by long gone bees,  
Life is renewed, to those of later age—  
That I be filled with vital, cosmic thought,  
From first of reas'ning, or its amplitude,  
And help receive for mine appointed task.

My longing was for Truth, the abiding thing.  
For, find the Truth, and its full scope proclaim  
Unto the groping elements of men;  
And bring them all to know the living Truth;  
And what its portents are to human souls;  
And fill their senses with the effulgent light  
That flows from Truth—then were there liberty,  
For greater thought was never yet declared  
For the uplifting of humanity  
Than: Truth alone is that which makes men free.

The morning of my quest comes to my mind.  
(A prattling child wert thou, my pupil, then!)  
How sure was I that Truth was nearly mine!  
And equal sure none other knew the Truth,  
Ev'n in its fullness, as 'twas known to me;  
And, in that searching for the higher things,  
How many others came into my path!  
They walked not always hand in hand with me;  
Nor shoulders touched, nor was there sympathy.  
Yet all of us were searching for the Truth,  
And nearly all were sure some Truth was his;  
And we, each one, did push, and haul, and glared  
Upon each other, as we passed, and searched;  
And imprecations hurled at others' heads;  
And each declared none other knew the Truth.  
And some flew at the others, in their wrath,  
Because such others knew not of the Truth,  
As known to those who did such violence.  
Now, later, in the after-time of search,  
Some few commenced to show more sympathy,  
Each for the others, who desired Truth.  
And when they did compare their inner-thought;  
Each, with the inner-thought the others held,  
Each was surprised to know the other ones  
Were as intense in searching for the Truth,

As he himself, with all his earnestness.  
Then light appeared more constant, unto them,  
And so much more, such ones did know of Truth;  
And had we but that time for search again,  
And those to meet upon our common way;  
How much of Truth, then, could we come to know,  
Would we but search, in bonds of sympathy,  
And hold to each the light we each would find,  
And cherish all; as from the source of Truth.  
In whole or part, if men do know the Truth,  
Will it not be by love of those who seek,  
Each for his fellows, as they search for Truth?  
And so I sought for Truth, and lived for Truth,  
And all the thought of all the other men,  
Whereat their burden was akin to mine,  
I did array; with totaled sum, or else  
Subtract result, according to my mind;  
But always, seeming without final force.  
Yet this appeared, and still abides with me:  
Unto each one comes something of the Truth;  
Some break of dawn, some flashes of the light,  
Although there may be rays that dazzle men,  
And shadows cast, that sometimes lead astray;  
And some whereat are thereby led astray.  
And some who thus are lost, are shadow bound,



With light, to a degree, on ev'ry side.  
And some of these become so used to shades,  
They know not of a brighter atmosphere;  
But think they're in the blazed light of Truth;  
That all besides, is dark,—within the false.  
And then sometimes I seemed to know the light,  
The Truth, of something in my vision's range,  
Again, to see more bright, when former view  
Did vanish, as doth dew on hills at morn.  
And then, somewhat, I changed my quest for Truth,  
For Truth, I found, abounded everywhere;  
Till I believe, with all mine any thought,  
That none should say, unto the ranks of men,  
“Here is all Truth,” or, “There all error lies;”  
But with an open mind to questioning;  
For 'tis a solemn thing, with moment charged;  
To lodge within the plastic minds of men,  
As of a Truth; that which is thought the Truth,  
But later doubted, and not known as Truth.  
For such placed things, have set a man 'gainst man,  
And battled millions 'gainst like numbered ones;  
And hardened hearts by nature filled with love,  
So that a flint were soft as breath of May,  
Compared with what such hardened hearts become.  
Not known, always, nor clear to those called men;



Yet some there be, the mirrors of whose souls  
Are yet so truly smoothed, to that degree,  
They do receive some ample rays of light;  
From the high source, and very fount of Truth,  
Which pass unmarked the glass of others there.

But what is Truth? Its office unto men?  
And whence its source? And what its destiny?  
The mirrors of my very self are rough,  
And not, as yet, of that high quality,  
That doth receive, and hold, such rays of light;  
Yet there is Truth, and from the deep recess  
Within each inner self, goeth out the cry,  
Compelled by longings of the human heart;  
Not always clarion, nor, with constancy,  
Yet sometime, to the source of Life and Hope:  
"Oh Thou, whence, where, whate'er in Truth Thou  
art,

Help me, Thy child, to know the whole of Truth."  
I know not how the Truth shall stand, appear;  
I know not how the Truth shall come to men,  
But this I think: In coming quest for light,  
Which is the Truth, there'll be a glorious time;  
When each shall search, not by himself, alone,  
But with the help of all his fellow men;

And much defer unto the light they have;  
Then shall Truth manifest itself through love.  
But this I more than think, I firmly know,  
Of this I feel assurance doubly sure:  
That Truth, itself, was never yet cast down,  
So that it groveled in an ethic dust;  
Nor raised above the level of its sphere,  
But ev'rywhere, where it relation held,  
Did as some stratum of the granite hills,  
Maintain its poise, and wait acknowledgment.  
If otherwise, then 'twere not of the Truth.  
One cannot go to star-lit fields at night,  
Nor deep into the wide extended groves;  
With all life's burdens pressing on his brow.  
Except it be a witness to declare,  
Alone, yet to the farthest universe:  
"There is the Truth, the ever Truth, and God!"

And if we pause, expectantly to hear,  
Then voices come, and urge persuadingly.  
Sometimes, methinks, the voice that comes to me,  
Is murmured from a distant, fairer clime;  
And that a mission from the clouds is sent,  
And given me, to help to normal thought.  
And so the word thou craved, is given thee,

In which that word, thy teacher sums the whole.  
What little honey hath been culled, is stored,  
For added strength, for workers yet to come.

My final message: "Speed the search for Truth,  
With perfect mind, in all tranquility;  
Nor disdain that, 'tho spoke by any man,  
Because, my son, it may be of the Truth;  
It may be that 'tis word sent from the God!"

*(Enter the Public Executioner and Officer.)*

SOCRATES: *(To Executioner.)*

Why come you here, my long expected friend?

EXECUTIONER:

Oh, Socrates, Athens declares to thee,  
That its decree must now be carried out;  
That thy appointed time to die hath come.  
I here present the hemlock; and inquire  
"If thou wilt drain the cup from thine own hands?"

SOCRATES:

Ne'er should man die as of his own desire;  
And neither should one cause another's death;  
Nor yet should citizen deny the State.  
Therefore, as 'tis decreed I am to die;  
E'en so, do I bow down to that decree,

And my hand act to satisfy the law,  
So that thy hand shalt not offend the God!  
First, let me look out at the evening sun,  
And see its golden blending with the blue,  
And, too, to note if 'twas the ship afar,  
That's given date to my conclusion here.

*(Socrates arises, steps to the window and looks  
out for a while, then turns to Criticles.)*

SOCRATES: *(To Criticles.)*

Canst bring two lines unto a parallel?  
The beak and talons of the cruel hawk,  
Did free the harmless lark for endless time;  
To where soul larks, in golden sunlit-rays,  
Are joined in wheeled flight, and carolled song.  
On then through woods and flower scented fields;  
O'er mountains wild, and gentle rivulets,  
And in th' eternal morning, chorus loud,  
With other larks who've learned new minstrelsy—  
And none shall fear the talons of the hawk.

And now, my son, thou'rt bid with cheer goodbye,  
Because the ship's returned. Pass me the cup,  
And I, upon this couch, thy hand in mine;  
Shall rest a while, and then pursue my way,  
To greet the great congenial minds of yore,



And homage show to th' Almighty Power—to God!

*(Socrates takes the hemlock, and drinks it smilingly.  
He walks around a little, lies down, and soon dies.  
His eyes are closed by Criticles, who weeps.)*

EXECUTIONER:

For twenty years, the poison I've prepared;  
For all that Athens hath condemned to die.  
Now, some did boldly drain the fatal cup,  
And some I was compelled secure to bind  
While I did force their lips to take the draught.  
Till now I never saw so fine a death  
As of my friend, the old philosopher.  
I could not tell if he preferred to live.  
I shall recall him, all my life, for that.

SOLDIER:

A splendid soldier wert thou, Socrates!  
More rapid beat came not to thy stout heart,  
Because a danger imminent was there.  
Thou faced the foe, I've heard my father say,  
With firm-set jaw, but yet a placid smile,  
And thy strong arm worked well against the foe.  
I saw thee face the charge for which thou'rt here;



Was present when thy sentence on thee passed,  
And now I can give ample testament,  
Thou showed no weakness, but didst die the man.  
Were those of Athens all like Socrates,  
There'd be no fear in any of her sons.

CRITICLES:

I wonder why, when all men wish for Truth,  
And none desire that of its opposite;  
That there should be, here in this land of Greece,  
So little love for him who loved all Greece,  
And whose affections were for all the world.  
The greatest mind, and heart, of all the earth,  
Dies meanly, and as should a common foe;  
I do not understand, unless a step  
That must be trod, upon the road to Truth.



















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