

**Evaluate the accuracy of “The Clouds” in portraying the political, social, economic and religious life of people in the fifth century BC Athens**

Greek theatre has always been a significant constituent in the past and present Athenian society. Fifth Century BC Athenian society proposed numerous playwrights in their festivities honouring the god, Dionysus. Amongst the many crowd favourites was a legend to describe him in the least, Aristophanes. His works of satirical comedy are still celebrated and enjoyed today. One such example of his famous satirical works is “The Clouds”, written in 423BC.

“The Clouds” is about a father, Strepsiades, who is in debt because of his son’s expensive horse hobby. Strepsiades tries to convince his son, Pheidippides, to attend the “Thinkery” (a school for sophistry), to learn the art of double talk in the hope of outwitting his creditors in court. However, Pheidippides denies his father’s request, so instead Strepsiades decides to enrol himself. Strepsiades’ attempts to learn sophistry but fails miserably when his old age gets the best of him. Another attempt to encourage his son to enrol becomes successful and Pheidippides learns to double-talk from the teacher Socrates. This is later regretted when, at the climax of the story, Pheidippides uses double-talk to justify him beating his father. Strepsiades, out of anger and rage, then sets fire to the Thinkery.

The main theme dealt with in the “The Clouds” is that of new versus old. Aristophanes challenges the radical thinkers like sophists and the imaginative thinkers like Socrates for oppressing the traditional values held and demoralising the youth. Another theme pertaining to “the clouds” is the confliction of religion and science. In fifth century BC, around the time when Aristophanes wrote the clouds, the commotion of “scientific theory” had just begun. With religion prevailing at the time, such atheistic thinking brought about by people like Socrates was firstly unlawful and secondly prone to ridicule by conservative figures such as Aristophanes.

“The Clouds” is rather accurate in depicting Athenian life. However the perception of Socrates evident in the text is not parallel to that of Socrates in real life. Aristophanes, like many, linked Socrates with the rest of the Sophists for the reason that he was a philosophical thinker, that is, he came up with reasoning without relying on faith. However, Socrates, like Aristophanes rejected the ideas of the Sophists. The sophists argued that guiding principles of a society, such as justice and truth, varied according to the needs of men in a particular time and place. In teaching their students, the sophists emphasised the art of argumentative discussion and came to be associated with deceptive and hollow reasoning. This is depicted in the clouds where better argument represents traditional thinking and the worse argument depicts that of the sophists. Despite Aristophanes’ rather critical portrayal of Socrates, the description of him as expressed through Pheidippides as “pale-faced charlatans, who haven’t any shoes” is actually relatively true. Since Socrates wore simple apparel, and walked barefoot through the streets, his ideas and peculiarity made him an easy subject of derision and he was often thought of as a fraudulent figure.

Socrates was also ridiculed for the fact he believed in one intelligent being as the creator of the universe. This went against the religious life of the Athenians. In “The Clouds”, Poseidon, god of horses is sworn on by Pheidippides and later again by Pasion (one of Strepsiades creditors) who also swears by Hermes and Zeus. These accounts are an accurate reflection the religious beliefs upheld by Athenian society. However, since “the clouds” is a satirical play, Aristophanes pokes fun at Socrates who is depicted to believe in the “vortex” as the ruler, not Zeus. This part of the play is not accurate, as it does not hold a factual purpose but rather that of entertainment and humour.

Rather than just analysing “The Clouds” on its plot, a more comprehensive read of the text reveals further details on 5<sup>th</sup> century Athenian life, all of which are precise in information. For instance, it is apparent in the text that concepts such as creditors, debtors and interest, were already in use at the time. This shows that Athenian society had in place forms of financing that still exist today. Also, there is a clear depiction of the judicial system present at the time. It is evident in the text that when taking a person to court a deposit must be made and if the case was lost the deposit was forfeited. Other instances in which “The Clouds” has effectively portrayed Athenian life is through their currency, such as drachmas and obols and also in their legal system, when the Better Argument makes reference to the punishment of adultery, this being having a radish shoved up his anus and his pubic hair singed with hot ash.

The people of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC Athenian society were rather wealthy and could afford slaves. The polarisation of the two classes of people within society is portrayed rather well. This is evident with Strepsiades’ servant Xanthias who lives an unpleasant life when compared to Pheidippides who indulges in the costly hobby of buying racehorses. This is further exemplified when Pheidippides mother insists to add –hippos (meaning horse) to Pheidippides name at birth so he could have the marks of the aristocratic classes.

In conclusion, “The Clouds” is a satirical play and should not be taken for face value. However, his portrayal of issues and figures within the society give an accurate insight into some of the beliefs held by the general public and if treated carefully could be considered as reliable historical source.

A serious theme underlies this comedy, namely: Ideas espoused by radical thinkers like the sophists and by highly imaginative thinkers like Socrates are undermining traditional values and corrupting the morals of youths. The sophists maintained that the guiding principles of a society, such as justice and truth, were relative concepts—that is, these principles changed according to the needs of men in a particular time and place. What was right and just in Athens was not necessarily right and just in another society. One man's virtue could be another man's vice. In teaching their students, the sophists emphasized the art of argumentative discourse and came to be associated with deceptive and specious reasoning, lampooned effectively in *The Clouds*. Another target of Aristophanes was Socrates, along with his associate, Chaerephon. Ironically, Socrates, like Aristophanes, renounced the methods and ideas of the sophists. Nevertheless, Socrates angered the establishment (1) by declaring that the validity of many long-standing precepts could not be proved by logical reasoning, (2) by rejecting the Olympian gods and sometimes speaking of a single intelligent being as the creator of the universe, and (3) by spreading “dangerous” ideas among young people. In addition, he alienated many Athenians because he was ugly and untidy (sometimes neglecting to bathe for a long while), wore simple apparel, and walked barefoot through the streets. Thus, his ideas and eccentricities made him a ripe subject for ridicule.