

Polysemy: The Femme Fatale of Literary Theory?  
Screenplay

OPENING SCENE: A cramped office, sparsely furnished with a heavy wooden desk, two chairs on either side. There is a bookshelf full of notebooks and oddities. A coat rack stands by the door, the top half of which is glass where the backwards silhouette of “Private Investigator.” can be seen. A man in a conservative grey suit sits in the chair behind the desk, fedora placed over his eyes and hands folded across his stomach.

A second man enters, wearing a black suit and shirt. The white collar symbolising his position with the church is just visible beneath his clenched jaw.

AUGUSTINE: “She’s gone too far this time, we must do something about this!”

PLATO (without moving): “Which ‘she’ are we discussing?”

AUGUSTINE (spluttering in frustration): “Which she? What other she is there?”

PLATO: “Ah. So it’s Polly.”

PLATO (sits up and reaches into a desk drawer, pulling out a large bottle of liquid and two glasses)

AUGUSTINE (throws hat on the desk, reaches for the drink Plato is pouring): “She’s begun printing Bibles. For individuals. She’s encouraging my congregation to interpret God’s Word in any way they choose.”

PLATO: “She’s been distributing forbidden texts for years.”

AUGUSTINE: “Not the Bible.”

PLATO: “True, but she enabled unauthorised personnel to get their hands on knowledge they shouldn’t interact with alone.”

AUGUSTINE: “And when it was just science, just theory, I could look the other way. But the Word of God is sacred. People need to understand *irony* and *metaphor* and *so much more* before they can properly interpret the messages of Christ.”

PLATO: “Some people would say even ‘just science’ can be dangerous in the wrong hands.”

AUGUSTINE (standing up, knocking back the rest of his whisky): “I won’t get into this again, Plato. Let’s just say that enough is enough. Bring her in.”

AUGUSTINE EXITS.

PLATO VOICEOVER: “I’ve been trying to ‘bring her in’ for so long it feels like a millennium. Her name was Polly, Polly Semy, and she was a deadly dame if there ever was one. Since the information restrictions were put in place, she had done some fine trade in black market texts. Ugly representations of great ideas. She’s sly, elusive. It’s hard to track her down and near impossible to stop her. While I’ve only caught glimpses of her myself, I’m familiar with the aftermath of her work: uneducated people running around, spouting off misconceptions like they have every right. Precisely the sort of thing the restrictions were supposed to stop. Augustine’s backing meant that I could finally go after her; her foray into the religious market was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

PLATO remains at his desk, staring into the glass in front of him. He finishes his own drink with a flourish and places his fedora on his head. He crosses the room to the coat rack, grabs his trench coat and exits.

#### SCENE TWO:

A montage of Plato lurking around the streets of Republica with a large, 1920s camera. Outside of a café, in front of the Opera, in an open-air market. Finishes with Plato in a dark room, the red light illuminating his face from the side. Zoom in onto the pictures, each showing the same woman in a different guise: a socialite in a slinky evening gown, working girl in her narrow skirt suit, one of her in a trench coat, scarf covering her head, handing a man a rectangular package as he slides an envelope across the table. In each, she wears a different wig.

PLATO (holding up the last image): “There you are, Miss Polly. Looks like I’m closing in.”

SCENE THREE: Inside a packed jazz club; the singer on stage is wearing a red dress, the band behind her in matching suits. The air is smoky, conversation and laughter drowns out the lyrics, and scotch is on special. Plato is standing by the bar, whisky in hand as he watches Polly at a table of young men and women in stylish clothes. She sees him staring at her, and slowly makes her way over to the bar.

POLLY: “Detective. You seem to be everywhere these days.” (She gestures to the bartender, who slides a martini across the bar to her.)

PLATO: “As do you. I know you’re up to something Polly. It’s just a matter of time before we take you in.”

POLLY: “Oh Plato. You never did appreciate the beauty of uncertainty.”

PLATO: “Enjoy your riddles now Polly. Where you’re going, you won’t be able to play your games.”

POLLY (stepping closer, trailing a finger across his chest): “Where I’m going, everyone’s going to play. Whether they enjoy it or not.” She laughs softly and walks away with a deliberate strut.

Plato watches her leave silently, finishes his drink, slaps a bill down on the bar and strides out the door.

The scene fades to him in his office, lamp burning on the desk, files and photos surrounding him.

As he talks, the film drifts off into the night, and begins to silently show the events he is describing.

PLATO VOICEOVER: I didn't realize it then, but the game was already over. Polly had met with a very dangerous group that same night. The men and women I thought were mere partygoers were part of the People Own Every Thought gang. [Flashback to scene from jazz club] The P.O.E.T.'s were a dangerous group given to flights of fancy. They strongly opposed textual repression, and their association with Polly Semy had long been suspected. [Shift to scenes of Polly and the P.O.E.T.'s filling a bus with books, then setting a timer on a bomb] Between the P.O.E.T.'s and Polly, they had hatched a plan to steal every text from the Text Police's internal warehouse – and blow up the building when they were done, ensuring all the files on previously convicted text owners were destroyed. By the time Augustine had come to me, we were donkeys at a horse race. Nothing left to do but choke on the dust as the Polly and the P.O.E.T.'s disappeared.

SCENE FOUR:

Plato walks up to his office door, where a package is waiting on the floor. He bends to pick it up, looks around, and unlocks and enters his office. As he walks to his desk, opens the parcel and the camera focuses on the object within: a copy of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. As he throws it to the desk, a note falls out of the packaging, landing beside the book. It says: "Detective, Just a little something to remember me by, P."

After a few seconds, the camera fades to black.

Roll Credits.

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Essay Component

The issue of polysemy is integral to literary theory, particularly when it is used through allegory or metaphor in the written word. Plato, one of the earliest theorists on literature, is particularly concerned with the dangers of misinterpretation, as can be seen explicitly in his “Phaedrus”. Centuries later, Augustine would discuss similar issues with polysemy in a religious context throughout his “On Christian Teaching”. It is this continuity of anxiety over polysemy, the “danger” ascribed to it, and especially the implications of restricting access to texts that inspired a film noir remix. It enables the reader to see the dialogue between Plato and Augustine clearly, as well as embodying polysemy in order to make it a tangible threat. This helps understand not only why these two theorists were both occupied with a disconnection in meaning, but also why they held different views on the matter. By using the larger theories on polysemy in a familiar format, both Plato’s and Augustine’s viewpoints are clarified, and the historical contexts surrounding polysemy can be translated, and better understood.

Plato, writing in the fourth century BCE, uses strong language to discuss his distaste for the written word in “Phaedrus”. The primary reason for his dislike is that texts enable “completely inappropriate people” to read concepts that are unsuitable for them and, by misunderstanding the text, inflict upon those ideas “unfair abuse” (Plato “Phaedrus” 79). This primarily corresponds to his devaluing of mimesis, the idea of art as representation. Plato argues that mimesis subverts “truth” and leads the reader away from the “ideal,” and that the written word is tantamount to a painting in that it is static and “incapable of defending or helping itself” (Plato “Phaedrus” 79). Augustine, who lived and wrote eight hundred years later, was far more narrow in his concerns regarding mimesis and polysemy. His “On Christian Teaching” shows a tolerance and even a respect for allegory as a method for teaching, for he says it allows one to

raise “the mind’s eye above the physical creation so as to absorb the eternal light” (Augustine 160). He intrinsically believes that truth can be found in God’s Word, but that only those who are taught to be aware of polysemy, as well as irony and other literary tools, can fully comprehend that truth, and the moral messages behind it. More specifically, he cautions Christian scholars against misinterpreting Christian words as “the improper use of something should be termed abuse” (Augustine 157). So, although Plato and Augustine do explore polysemy from different points on the spectrum, they both caution their educated, “enlightened” readers against unrestricted access to texts for the masses based upon the dangers of polysemy. This established a dialogue between the two that would be referenced by many other theorists. Many of these philosophers and writers would form opposing arguments, and these authors will be discussed later.

The format of a film noir is very structured. From the French for “black film,” the genre was prominent from the 1940s through the 1950s (“film noir”). Many film noirs are based on crime fiction from the 1930s and often focus on dark antiheroes and a femme fatales; the characters are often morally ambiguous, as is the central conflict (Skoble 43). Indeed, there is usually considerable tension created by a moral dilemma: while there is a clear legal “right choice,” it is often supplanted by a more moral option, or a more attractive immoral alternative (Skoble 44). As will be discussed momentarily, this suited the relationship between Plato, Augustine, and Polly as it displays the indefinite nature of literary discourse towards polysemy. What is important for the current discussion is that film noir as a format suits the attitudes of Plato and Augustine towards allegorical worth and how to deal with textual ambiguity. Plato is the staunch conservative who views the actions of Polly as asocial; for Plato, the work of poets and other writers cannot help someone progress, and so their texts have no place in society (Plato

“Phaedrus” 78). Augustine, conversely, is more lenient and alludes to his willingness to “look the other way” as she distributes forbidden texts, as long as the members of his church are not adversely affected in their religious studies. His main concern is the moral welfare of his charges, and for him that does not necessarily negate allegorical works (Augustine 157). Thus, Plato plays the part of the hard-boiled detective, while Augustine plays the man hiring him – the man “driven too far” by the actions of Polly. In his writings, this is shown clearly by admission that “some things which are to be enjoyed, [and] some which are to be used” (Augustine 157). However, he goes on to remark that those who are “literary minded” must be aware of the figures of speech which can lend ambiguity to written works. He specifies that in scripture it is especially important to beware of these tropes, and to ensure no wrong meaning is taken away from the passage (Augustine 160-161). This is then brought together by his character in the film noir reacting strongly to the idea of individual interpretations of the Bible being conducted without previous teaching, although he was not concerned with the reproductions of other works.

More than just a play on words, polysemy embodied as femme fatale Polly Semy underscores the deviant quality attributed to polysemy by both Plato and Augustine. Femme fatales are traditionally very attractive women who are morally ambiguous. They are portrayed as subversive, dangerous, and almost always result in the downfall of the main male character (Wager 40). In Plato’s time period, women were seen as intellectually inferior and malformed, while in Augustine’s, they were seen as the root of all sin (Weisner-Hanks 22; 19). This last point is particularly pertinent to the use of a woman as the character of polysemy, as Augustine also believed that sin resulted in polysemy (Augustine 159). Regardless, in both eras women were considered inferior to men, and usually deviant. Therefore, using the femme fatale convention to bring an abstract literary concept to “life” seemed appropriate when taken into

cultural context. Polysemy is portrayed by Plato as being combated in the spoken word by the teacher being able to defend his ideas instantaneously. In the written word those same ideas “can neither speak in their own defence nor come up with a satisfactory explanation of the truth,” and therefore cannot be trusted (Plato “Phaedrus” 80). It is something to be aware of, and to take measures against, as the written form is merely a past concept, dead and unable to evolve. This is shown clearly in the remix as Plato’s attitude towards Polly is hostile; her work with the “P.O.E.T.’s” is directly opposed to his own beliefs, and he views her as a subversive entity. He does not want uneducated people given access to ideas that they cannot understand. Augustine does employ a more moderate view of polysemy, as is shown by his inferred previous leniency on Polly.

Finally, Polly’s social and radical link to the “P.O.E.T.’s” is a direct reference to the fact that many of the theorists that continued the dialogue of allegory and polysemy did not agree with the ideas espoused by Plato and Augustine. Dante Alighieri is a prime example of one of these poets who advocated for recognition on behalf of polysemy and allegory as important components of literary works. His extensive use of the literary tool in “The Divine Comedy” is a particularly powerful indication of that affiliation, for as an introduction to his work comments “much of the richness of The Divine Comedy, for example, derives from the gap allegory opens between the sign and what it might signify” (Leitch 186). Other writers who can be considered part of the “P.O.E.T.’s” group could include Sir Philip Sidney, Gorgias, and Wordsworth. By placing them directly in conflict with Plato, and to an extent Augustine, the film noir remix showcases this wide spectrum of ideas concerning the use of allegory in literature. Given that Plato desires to outlaw the poet from his ideal society in “Republic, Book X” because it incites illogical and immoral behaviour (Plato “Republic” 77). Thus, his portrayal as a detective intent

on maintaining social order against the “P.O.E.T.’s” is logical, and illustrates his position on polysemy and mimesis well. It also is why the city he is defending is “Republica.” The final scene of the remix, where Plato receives a copy of Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* is also a commentary on that dialogue, as the novel describes a world where the restriction of texts has become a legal issue. The novel partly inspired the setting of the remix, and the ideas it is criticizing can be traced back to Plato’s and Augustine’s beliefs regarding the use of texts. Moreover, it can be seen as directly corresponding to Plato’s preference that poets be excluded from the Republic.

By remixing the theories of Plato in “Phaedrus” and Augustine in “On Christian Teaching” into a classic film noir screenplay the larger discourse over allegory in literary theory can be better understood. Through their own literal dialogue and the embodiment of polysemy as a femme fatale, their individual views on the issue are clarified. Furthermore, by placing these two theorists and their opposition in the same temporal space, it allows for a clearer concept of that discussion to be analysed.



Works Cited

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